神様のメモ帳
杉井 光
イラスト＊岸田メル
電撃文庫

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杉井 光（すぎい ひかる）

1978年、東京生まれ。しかし生まれ故郷がどこなのか言うと、東京の人すら知らなかったり、知っていても神奈川県だと思っていたりするくらいの田舎である。謝れ。神奈川県に謝れ。ごめんなさい。

【電撃文庫作品】

火目の巫女
火目の巫女 巻ノ二
火目の巫女 巻ノ三
神様のメモ帳

イラスト：岸田（きしだ）メル

1983年生まれ、名古屋在住。好きな食べ物はラーメン。好きな飲み物は水。趣味は教育テレビを見ること。絵を描いてるときもずっと見てます。ホームページは http://maigo.jp/

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神様のメモ帳

杉井 光
イラスト＊岸田メル

ずっとひとりで、空っぽのまま、
人生はなんとなく過ぎていくものだと思っていた。
でも、その冬に僕はいろんな人と出逢った。
ボクサー、ラーメン屋、軍人、ヒモ、探偵、やくざ、同級生。
それぞれが心の隙間を抱えながら、
それでもみんな自分の足で歩いていた。
ときには寄りかかり合いながら。ときには馬鹿騒ぎをしながら。
僕もそうなれるんじゃないかと、少しだけ思った。
普通に笑って、普通に怒って、普通に泣くことを憶えた。
いろんなものを喪くして、そこではじめて、
空っぽじゃないことに気づいた。
これは、そんな十六歳の冬の物語。

Characters
登場人物
ヒロシ
ヒロシ
少佐
アリス
彩夏
ナルミ
テツ先輩
ミンさん

"It's a primitive response to gratitude. To give pleasure. You see, our normal hosts are quite mindless; they can be thanked only by physical sensation."

"Thank you for agreeing to transport me. Thank you very much."

- "The Only Neat Thing to Do" by James Tiptree, Jr.

Chapter 1

A boxer, a soldier, a gigolo, a detective, even a Yakuza boss—

I met so many different types of people that winter; the winter I was sixteen. Technically they were all classified as *NEET*s, but they were different kinds. *NEET*, the term occasionally manages to find its way into newspapers or television. At the time I thought it merely referred to unmotivated and unemployed youths, but the reality was that there were many different sides to them. There was no all-encompassing reason they remain jobless and fail to attend school.

“The term *NEET* refers to neither ‘useless people’ nor ‘lazy people’”. It was those words which that detective said to me. “The only difference lies in the rules. While everybody seems content using the board to play checkers we play chess instead.”

“I don’t get it. Doesn’t that mean you’re just getting in the way?” The naive me of then questioned. The detective seemed to think for a moment, pursing those cherry-like lips which eventually gave way to a silent smile.

“I suppose that it would seem that way to those who just want to rush ahead. I understand that society wants to just group us together and label us: flinging us out into a rubbish dump. I also understand that they want to point at us, to laugh mockingly. Let them laugh all they want. No matter how you argue with it, the fact remains. We’re a negative influence on society at large, that’s undeniable.”

The detective lowered her head, gazing at her opened palms before looking at me again. This time her smile was not one of sarcasm or of bitterness, instead it was one comparable to the rays of sunlight on a freezing winter’s day. “We will never laugh at ourselves. Just as earthworms do not fear darkness and penguins are not ashamed of their inability to fly. That’s the meaning of life, is it not?”

I couldn’t muster a response. Perhaps it was that I had never

thought so deeply about matters such as these before. Regardless of how you dress it up, of how many metaphors you use, doesn't the main fact remain? You're still all useless people.

However, it was that same winter I saw my first corpse, that I assaulted another person. It was the first time in this life of mine that I had contemplated what it truly meant to be alive. Though, I suppose anyone who'd witnessed another person forfeit their life and seek death might feel the same way.

But I regress, that is a story for later. For now I will tell you about the winter I first met these people, and the story of a normal, non-*NEET* girl.

*

Near the end of November, I met Ayaka for the first time.

After school ended on Tuesday, I sat on the water tower on the roof of the southern campus, and stared blankly at tall buildings far away. Normally once school ends, I would go to the computer lab and focus on club activities that only need one person. But on afternoons with computer lessons, there are a lot of students remaining to play on the computers that they usually don't have access to. I am unable to bring myself to walk in just like that, so I end up coming up to the roof to waste time every Tuesday and Thursday. Staring at the computer lab on the second story of the northern campus, I gave off a lot of "Get lost already!" waves, and sighed as I looked at the streets below.

The streets of the city I currently live in can be divided into two colors, while the long thin river that flows like the artery of a patient is the divider of the colors. The side closer to me has rusted roofs of factories, cheap apartments lying side by side, and then there is the high school. I am not sure why, but there are a lot of shrines and graves in this area; My house is also on this side. On the other side is a tall flyover bridge with a highway leading to the

capital, a gigantic train station with countless railways, tall buildings packed along complicatedly interweaving roads on the slope, shopping malls and television stations. On sunny days, you can even see the shadow of the government building far away. Tokyo is an amazing place to let boring housings that can be found anywhere in Japan and tall modern buildings co-exist peacefully here.

Looking down from the roof, the train station is like a scene in an advertisement on TV, without realism. Perhaps it's because I don't want to get close to that area? As we can wear our school uniform and straightaway go out to play immediately after school, I heard that our school is rather popular in Tokyo; If the sailor costume has bright colors, it might even increases the attractiveness by around 40%.

That day was a cloudy day, just nice enough that you can closely examine the glass panels of the tall buildings that are normally unclear due to their piercing reflections. Speaking of which, they are just a bunch of glass windows that are cut using similar methods. I always filled those glass squares with colors in my mind, as though I was sketching pixel art.

I've gotten used to killing time like that. I think it's because I'm always transferring schools due to my dad's work. At the beginning of October, when I transferred into my current high school, I joined the Computer Club just because there was no one else active there, and went about my school life without getting noticed by anyone. I've often thought that there's no point in me going to high school, while I couldn't follow the lessons as well.

As I was gazing at the building, I suddenly heard a clattering sound below me, and thus I leaned my upper body outwards to have a look. The water supply tower was set on top of the stair room jutting out from the roof while the sound was that of someone who had climbed up the stairs and opened the door.

"Eh? He's not here?"

I heard a girl's voice. When I carefully leaned forward and peered directly below, she turned around, meeting my gaze.

She had short hair, and strong-spirited eyebrows, in contrast her eyes, which gave off a cute, friendly impression. I felt like I'd seen her before. As I moved to get up, she made an extremely surprised face, letting out a "Wah!", causing me to tumble down from the water supply tower.

It was lucky that I fell from my feet, but as the backs of my hands scraped roughly against the concrete wall, the first thing she did when we met was to wash my wounds with water from the watering can she had.

"Why would you climb up a place like that, it's dangerous!"

She said while applying plasters on my wound. Being asked such a question, I couldn't answer her.

"……idiots and something like high places, after all."

"You have to play down the 'idiots' part when you say that!" [1]

She calmly replied. Although I wanted to escape, I couldn't do so as my hand was held tightly.

"There, I'm done. Remember not to climb to high places again." She lightly tapped my right hand that was full of plasters, just like a caretaker who was scolding small children. Then, she said while smiling, "Even though I said all that, I actually climbed it before myself. Seeing the ladder over there really gives you an urge to climb it, doesn't it?"

Anyway, who on earth is this girl? As I can't recall neither faces nor names of anyone in school, I cannot think of any girl who would talk to me with such a friendly tone.

Suddenly, I saw the yellow badge on her left arm. Although it was quite old and was already somewhat faded, the words 'Gardening Committee' could still be seen on it. At that moment, I finally noticed the large number of flower pots arranged by the railings. Does our school even have a Gardening Committee?

"Ah, so you have to climb that high to see the computer lab! Are you that type of person, Fujishima-kun? Those who can't

concentrate when someone else is in the room? The type that people call the artistic type?

The girl held on to the railings, saying all that while looking at the school building opposite of us. I was taken aback.

“——How do you know about that?”

I let out a shout that startled even myself. She turned around to look at me with a look of shock on her face.

“Well, our class is on this side of the third floor, so that's why the computer lab can be seen from there. Besides, Fujishima-kun always sits beside the windows.”

I was found out. Color drained out of my face. How much does this girl know? She doesn’t know that I was drawing naughty pictures on the computer, does she? Wait, that’s not the main point…

“Why do you know my name?”

She raised her arms like a baseball pitcher who was getting ready to pitch the ball. It seemed my question surprised her.

“Don’t you remember me? We’re even in the same class!”

“Huh?”

I started to become anxious. From the time when I transferred to this school, I practically avoided all contact with other people, which is why I can’t remember the names of my classmates.

“It was I who told you where the canteen is and also collected information of World History for you. Even when you were changing clothes during P.E class, I have helped you out!”

“Wa- Wait a minute!”

“That last comment was just a joke～”

Ugh, this girl…

“Although I thought that you might have forgotten about me, I didn’t really believe that it would really be true…..”

Seeing the girl with tears glistening in her eyes, I can’t help but feel somewhat guilty.

“My name is Ayaka Shinozaki, and I sit just beside you in class. How can you forget about me even like this?”

“I’m sorry…”

“Fujishima-kun, you don’t think that you are a part of class 1-4, do you? You even skipped school during the school festival.

But the school festival was held just a week after I transferred, so I had no other choice but to skip it!

“And you aren’t even wearing the class badge. It's rare for public high schools to have class badges, so it would be a pity if you don’t wear it!”

I didn’t really think it’s a pity, so I lied to her: “ I lost it.”

“Then I’ll lend you mine then, I have some to spare at home.” Said Ayaka while she took off her class badge from her sailor uniform.

“Huh? No, there’s really no need to.”

“Seriously, don’t move.”

She caught me from the back when I was trying to escape. I couldn’t help but freeze and pause my breathing for a moment. She moved her hands to the front of my blazer and put on the class badge on the collar of my blazer. Looking at this from another angle, wouldn’t it seem like she was hugging me from behind? No, wait, I have to calm down.

After what seemed like a very long time, the warmth of her body finally faded from my back.

“Hmm, that’s better.”

She turned me around and nodded with a satisfied look on her face. With a complicated feeling, I lowered my gaze and gazed at the blue and green badge. It was as though an alien thing appeared on my neck. Why did she help me to this extent? I saw many other people who take very good care of transfer students, but it was the first time I saw someone who was *that* helpful.

“It is a requirement of the school rules that one must wear a class badge, so don’t you take it off.”

“Why do the schools in Tokyo have so many odd rules…..”

Actually, isn’t it my fault for feeling that Tokyo is a very free place in the first place? One of the many annoying rules is that students must join at least one club. It was all because of these rules that I got into these kinds of troubles.

“If it weren’t for the school rules, you probably would have been in the Going-Home-Club, wouldn't you?”

So? So what?

“But isn’t the Computer Club going to be abolished next year?”

“……Huh?”

“You see, the Third Years are going to graduate soon. I heard that they are going to abolish clubs that have less than two members when they decide the club budgets next April.”

It was the first time that I’ve heard of such an important matter. I thought of the pale, tomato-shaped face of the Computer Club advisor. That guy wants to let the Computer Club close down without saying a thing, huh? No wonder my club activities are so relaxing.

“As I was saying…”

Ayaka suddenly raised her voice, startling me into stepping back half a step.

“I have something to discuss with you. If you accept my

conditions…..” Her expression was that of one who made a strong resolution. “I agree to join the Computer Club!”

“……Conditions?”

“Actually, I’m the only member left in the Gardening Club as well.”

Ayaka, who had a triumphant look on her face for some reason, placed the armband on her left arm on my palm. Gardening Club? Isn’t it the Gardening Committee?

“The committee was closed down ages ago. I found this lying around in a cupboard. Isn’t it cool?”

“Not at all.”

“Why do you always say things like that!”

Her whole face flushed red. Why do you have to be so agitated, I don't understand at all.

“Small clubs have to help each other out, isn’t that right?”

*

In the end, I succumbed to Ayaka’s threats and accepted her conditions. We went to the staff room to hand in our application forms, and things were supposed to end just like that. Realizing that I cannot stay at the rooftop alone anymore, I could only find another place to while away time after school. On the way home, I thought to myself: Is the library better or is the restroom exclusive for teachers better?

However, Ayaka walked by my table right after school.

“I’m going to borrow the keys to the rooftop, so you can get the gardening tools first! You know where they are , right? You can find them in the cupboard with “Gardening Committee” on it.”

My classmates’ gazes fluttered between Ayaka and I, who was busy putting away my books.

“Am I not just a ghost member?” I started to say.

“…..A ghost member?” With her face pale, Ayaka turned away and covered her mouth. “Th- That’s right, I’m so sorry. I- I was just too excited, and that confused me for a moment.”

It looked like tears could pour out of her eyes at any moment. My classmates’ gazes pierced through me, as though it was I who made Ayaka cry…… No, it *was* I who made her cry. Anyhow, this situation is just terrible.

“Erm, uh, wait a sec!”

“Fujishima-kun, you’re busy with your activities at the Computer Club, right? I’m really sorry for bothering you.”

“O- Of course not——”

“Aren’t you going to complete your drawing of the girl on the computer soon? You just haven’t added the dress yet, right?”

“UWAAAAAAHHHHH!”

I hastily covered Ayaka’s mouth.

“Alright, alright! I got it. I’ll help you then.”

“…… Really?” The tears vanished from her face in a flash. “Thank you so much!”

She stuck out her tongue, as though it was just a prank just now. Arrggh, this girl…

“Aya-chan, there's a new member in your club?”

A female classmate asked while giving me a suspicious look.

“Oh, yes. That’s why we have more horsepower now. You can ask him anything about plants!”

My classmates exchanged looks.

“Oh, yeah!” a male classmate raised his hand. “There’s a lot of mold

on the washroom sink, please think of something to help."

"Mold isn't even a plant!" exclaimed Ayaka.

"No, it should count as a plant, shouldn't it?" "Differentiating organisms by animals or plants is already outdated!" "Aren't the ones in the washroom moss?" "Lichen are definitely not plants!" "The ones in the Biology Club, shut up." "But it's growing really quickly." "Looks like a person's face." "Seriously?"

The guys started to discuss the topic with vigor. What is wrong with this class? After about twenty minutes of discussion, Ayaka ended up getting a mold spray to clear it away. I hastily stopped Ayaka, who was about to dash into the men's washroom.

"……Allow me!"

My classmates probably feel sorry for me for having to clear away the mold that have spread on the whole wall. A few of them came in to give me a hand. The washroom soon stank of the pungent odor of chlorine.

"Fujishima, it was hard on you……"

They started to pity me.

"Of course, Shinozaki is not bad too." "Not a bad person." "Yeah."

I nodded tiredly while scrubbing the wall vigorously with a sponge.

I suddenly noticed that it was the first time my classmates called me by my name. Even so, I just stammered, unable to even answer them properly.

*

"Let's have a welcome party! My treat!"

She said that evening as we were carrying the orchid plants indoors.

"I work part time at a ramen store, so I can give you a discount."

I thought to myself: How rare for high school girls to work part time.

“As I often went there, I became a part time worker in the end. There are many interesting customers as well. Do you want to go with me?”

“Why——”

Thinking that I would have to see Ayaka’s tearful face if I refuse her, I nodded reluctantly. After keeping the tools in the cupboard and returning the keys to the staff’s office, I walked out of the school entrance with her.

After learning that I haven’t even gone across the Shuto Expressway, she was astonished.

“But don’t you live just nearby?”

“Well, I’ve just moved here recently, and there’s a lot of people at the station, so I didn’t really feel like going. Besides, I don’t even have a reason to go there.”

“Don't you usually go to bookshops or record stores?”

I nodded. Usually, I would just buy books or records that I want online, as I might not find the things that I want even if the actual shops are big.

“Is that so? But the shop that I’ve just mentioned is very far from the station. The ramen isn’t really that good, but the ice-cream there is extremely delicious, so it’s still very famous.”

“Then just start an ice-cream shop instead…”

“Try not to say that to Min-san, or you’ll get ramen served with ice cream.”

Min-san would probably the owner of the ramen shop. Is he Chinese?

Ayaka walked a bit faster than me. Seeing her happily prancing

around, I was extremely mystified. Where did it go wrong? How did it turn out like this? Why is she so nice to me?

When we were crossing the bridge, a large delivery truck passed by, spraying dust on us. After entering the streets, we walked past the Shuto Expressway viaduct and towards the station. Then, we went along with the crowd and entered the south side of the underpass and exited it through the east side.

We walked back to the surface in the direction of the railways. After we passed by a tramp's tent in a park, we found the ramen shop in a dark alley unreached by streetlights. On the first floor of the building that had both shops and lodgings, only the signboard that says 'Hanamaru Ramen' had any light on it. The customers gathered around the shop looked like bugs attracted to a bug zapper.

The interior of the ramen shop was very cramped. Most of the space in the shop was taken up by the kitchen, while only five tables were in the shop. The other customers could only dine outside on a steel chair. There were even some customers who were sitting on turned over beer crates, eating their ramen while holding the bowl.

"You can just sit wherever you like."

After saying that, she entered the shop. Although she told me to sit wherever I like, the problem is the chairs and beer crates are already fully seated.

I saw a man sitting on the emergency staircase between a building and another one that Ayaka just went in, located by the entrance of the kitchen. Beneath the stairs, there were stacks of worn tires, small gas tanks and some cardboard boxes full of stains.

When he raised his head, I couldn't help but take a step back. The man was about twenty and had darkish skin. It was already November, but he was just wearing a T-shirt, completely showing off his bulging biceps. On the moment that he stared at me, I even thought that I would get killed.

"Are you a student of M High School?"

“Nonono, I’m still in middle school. Do I look that much like a high schooler?” I lied for no reason at all. He put down his bowl and said:

“Really? There's a teacher teaching Maths, Fukumoto-sensei. Does he still have any hair left?”

“No, a lot of his hair has already dropped o……AHHH!”

He approached me and flicked my forehead. The pain made me feel as though it bore a hole on my forehead.

“…… Uuuuuu…… That’s too despicable of you. Since you’ve graduated from our school, why don’t you say so in the first place!” I, myself, don’t understand why I feel that he is despicable (It was obvious from my school uniform that I’m from M High School, its my problem for lying). I covered my aching forehead and crouched down while moaning. On that moment, a voice rang behind me:

“He didn’t graduate. This guy was kicked out of school: a drop out. Here, eat this.”

When I turned my head, I saw a young lady in a gray, sleeveless vest standing behind me. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail, and you could see a white sarashi[2] around her chest. She looked just like a laborer. It was only because of the black apron with ‘Hanamaru’ printed on it in white that I realized that she was from the shop. Does that mean that she is Min-san? So she’s a woman!

The thing that Min-san just stuffed into my hands was a paper cup filled with ice cream.

“Master, I’ve told you many times already, I was not kicked out. I dropped out myself.”

“Say that after you’ve cleared your tab, you bum.”

“Babies are jobless when they are born too! It’s just that they are tainted in the large bathtub called life after that!"

That would be colorless, not jobless. [3] But Min-san doesn’t seem to want to reply to him, but instead turned around and went back into

the kitchen that was filled with white smoke. I held the paper cup with the ice cream and just stood there in a daze for quite some time.

“Hey, you there!” the person who was kicked out of school called me. As soon as I turned around, I hastily covered my forehead.

“What are you so nervous for! So you’re in first year now, huh?” He said while looking at my class badge. “How many fails did you get in your test?”

“Huh?”

Why on earth are you asking me something like this?

“Fujishima-kun, don’t chat with Tetsu-senpai for too long, you’ll get the NEET virus!”

Ayaka, who wore her black apron over her school uniform, said while walking out of the kitchen with a tray full of bowls. The dark skinned guy —— Tetsu-senpai gnashed his teeth, but only pretended to flick Ayaka’s forehead. This is just plain preferential treatment! Ayaka stuck out her tongue, and started to serve the customers outside the shop.

“Oh, just answer me already! Your face is that of one who fails a lot since first year.”

Although I thought that he was a busybody, what he said was still the truth. I could only answer in a small voice: “ I need to retake my English and Japanese History.” Tetsu-senpai caught hold of my arms while beaming, forcefully dragged me to a gas tank and made me sit down.

“Actually, the seats here are specially for NEETs. You have the potential to be a NEET, so if you drop out, feel free to come here! We will always welcome you.”

“No, please don’t expect that of me.” We? Is there anyone else who’s with him?

“Why? I can start from teaching you how to choose pachinko

machines! Also, I know some of the employees quite well, so I know which one has the highest frequency of hitting the jackpot!"

When I had a closer look, I saw some magazines about pachinko gambling stashed in Tetsu-senpai's hind pocket. Whoa, so this guy is a professional pachinko player. What a useless person. I averted my gaze, and started to eat the ice-cream using a wooden spoon. Basking in the evening sun of this late autumn and savoring the delightful aroma of the ramen soup while eating ice cream is indeed exceptionally scrumptious.

The second person of the 'we' that Tetsu-senpai spoke of appeared when I was eating roast pork noodles. He suddenly pressed a hard object against the back of my head and said: "Don't move. Throw away your weapon, raise your hands, declare your name and unit." I almost spitted the roast pork out of my mouth.

"Erm…… Err…… But……" If I raised my hands, the roast pork will fall down!

"Major, you are so slow. Stop doing idiotic stuff and sit down."

Tetsu-senpai said while stirring his vanilla flavored ice cream and caramel sauce.

"But he's sitting on my seat! Who is this fellow?"

"Narumi. He's in the same club as Ayaka."

"Hiro-san said that he's coming later too, there won't be enough seats then."

"Hiro can just sit on Narumi's thigh."

"Oh, I see."

What do you mean you see?

The guy called Major then walked into my field of vision. He wore a dark green and coffee-coloured camouflaging sports attire, a sturdy looking helmet, and a pair of sunglasses shaped like goggles. He was somewhat thin and his skin was a beautiful shade of pink that

belongs to primary school students. He actually looked about my age. While putting away the model gun (Well, I think it might be a model gun, but what if it's a real gun?) into his khaki backpack, he looked at me and said:

"But isn't this guy a high schooler? He doesn't fit the description of a NEET."

"Don't worry, he's my kouhai. He'll become a great NEET after a year or two."

"I definitely won't become a NEET!" I protested hastily. Through his goggles, Major glared at me and sat on a cardboard box.

"In this era when there are about a billion NEETs in our country, NEETs-in-waiting like you are necessary, are they not? The future of our country sure is dark."

"……in waiting?"

In bewilderment, I asked him what he meant by that. Major pointed at me and started to chatter enthusiastically:

"Speaking of which, do you know the how a NEET is defined? The term 'NEET' was originally used on people who are between the ages of 16 and 18 and are not in education or employment. When the word came to Japan from England, its meaning changed to include people from 15 to 34. As a lot of types appeared after that, they were even classified into an active type and a passive type, a sudden type, challenged type, caveman type and hesitating type. Besides that, there were also some attempts to classify them using three-dimensional coordination to divide them into eight quadrants, but they are actually just meaningless classifications to me."

"Mukai-san, sorry for the wait."

Ayaka served Major his salt-flavoured ramen. It looks like Mukai is Major's real name.

"I'm so sorry, Fujishima-kun, there would be less customers after a while."

I tried to give Ayaka a 'justfindanexcuseformetoleavethisseat' signal, but she didn't get it. Major sipped some soup and continued:

"NEETs were originally just a cultural illness of reliance, and will only appear in a prosperous country like ours. We should be more proud of NEETs! Love the country that strives to produce NEETs, for world peace, we must stand up! We must find more non NEET-in-waiting elites, learn from each other , form a new Japanese Party, and bravely challenge the evil! Grow, NEETs! Grow like blazing fire! NEETs!"

"So noisy! Just shut up and eat your noodles!"

Min-san's furious outburst echoed from the kitchen, and a small frying pan flew out of the kitchen soon after, landing on Major's head.

"Huh? What's with that guy?"

A male voice rang in the alley, and a tall silhouette appeared at the end of the alley.

A young man daringly wearing a brightly colored coat with khaki jeans was standing at the end of the alley. His occupation was a mystery, but he radiated the aura of a professional person. His aura was different from what Tetsu-senpai had, but they have the same imposing manner. That man approached, almost causing me to fall off the gas tank.

"He's Ayaka's friend. See, he's from M High School." Said Tetsu-senpai. "Oh? Oh——"That man patted my shoulders and said:

"There was a time when Tetsu was wearing this uniform too!"

He shot a look at the narrow kitchen back door and sat down beside Tetsu-senpai. I started to get confused. Aren't the seats here just for NEETs?

"Hi, nice to meet you. Here's my card." He took a piece of card out of his pocket and handed it to me. He *is* a working person! While thinking so, I took the card, on the card it was printed:

'NEET – Hiroaki Kuwabara'

…… Huh? I nearly fainted at that moment.

To reconfirm the world that I live in, I breathed in deeply and looked at my surroundings. Tetsu-senpai was eating ice cream, Major was eating salt-flavored ramen. Ayaka was busy washing bowls in the smoky kitchen, Min-san was having a battle royale with flames. Looking at the night skies in this autumn, the only person who found something wrong was me.

"Is…… Is your job a NEET?"

I asked cautiously. Hiro-san showed me a smile worthy of a toothpaste advertisement while saying:

"What are you talking about? A NEET isn't an occupation!"

Well, that's true. As I was about to nod, Hiro-san's next comment completely devastated me.

"Being a NEET is a lifestyle."

He actually said that it was a lifestyle? I almost cried. Hiro-san, with his eyes narrowed while pushing back his hair, was meaninglessly handsome. What on earth is with these people?

"Did you make these cards before this, Hiro?"

"Well, its quite convenient while flirting. People always laugh when they see it."

"Didn't I tell you that you'll make your girlfriend angry like this, and that you shouldn't flirt with other people so much?"

"Ah, I broke up with her already. I'm now living at the house of a lady working at a night club. Making it clear that I'm jobless from the start makes my life much easier!"

So Hiro-san is a gigolo! Well, he did say that it was a lifestyle.

I listened to their conversation at the sidelines while drinking the

ramen soup, but I didn't really notice its taste. From their conversation, I gathered that they were about 18 to 19, and are supposed to be teenagers who have bright futures.

I vaguely thought to myself: would Tetsu-senpai's words that I'll turn out like them soon come true? I could only hope that this won't be true.

After we finished eating the ramen, and were enjoying the ice creams (Tetsu-senpai was already eating a second), extremely noisy rock music suddenly blared in this narrow space. It was 'Colorado Bulldog[4]. The three immediately sprang up, took out their cellphones that were almost simultaneously playing the same ringtone.

Tetsu-senpai picked up the call first, then Major and Hiro-san's phone immediately stopped ringing. An expression that looked very much like regret appeared on their faces.

"Min-san, Alice has an order for you! Onion ramen, without ramen, roast pork and egg."

Doesn't that mean that there's only leeks left? I thought to myself. After three minutes, the bowl that Min-san took out did look like there was only leeks and soup.

"Tell this to her clearly, we sell ramen." Min-san said with a sour expression on her face.

The leeks floating in the soup looked like islands in a sea of soup. Tetsu-senpai, Major and Hiro-san looked at each other.

"The problem is, who's gonna take it to her?" said Tetsu-senpai.

"Does Alice seem like she's in a bad mood?" asked Hiro-san.

"Definitely."

"Are you guys taking it to her?" me asking this question was a sign of doom. Tetsu-senpai nodded, and then slapped his kneecap.

"Since there's four people here, let's decide by a Yamanote Line

game[5], the one who loses sends it.”

Four people?

“So what’s the topic?”

“Let's use “Brochures commonly found at employment agencies” then.”

“Okay, but there’s only one chance when you can’t answer.”

“Wa- Wait a minute, did you count me in?”

“Okay, let's start from me. ‘Guide to a Laborer’s Insurance’.”

“ ‘Searching for your Dreams from Thirty-two’.”

“ ‘Discover your Talents in Two Minutes’.”

“Ah, uh, erm……”

“Narumi, that’s your first loss. ‘How to Resign Favorably’.”

“ ‘Starting Your Business From A Computer’!”

“ ‘Guide for Blending in your New Workplace’.”

“…… How on earth would I know any of those!”

“Ah, getting angry are you? Narumi, as long as you’re a NEET, you’ll have to know about these! Going to an employment agency but coming back without doing anything, this is a route that all of us must take.”

No, the problem is I’m not a NEET.

“If you lose you’ll have to admit it, loser.”

“Don’t mind it, Narumi, it isn’t embarrassing that you don’t know about these.”

“Well, of course! Don’t console me!”

“But you still have to send over the ramen!”

Unable to retort, that was how I fell into their trap.

The place where I was supposed to send the ramen was in the same building as the ramen shop, but on the third floor, room 308. As they said: “You’ll know when you go.” There was a large signboard on the door.

‘NEET Detective Agency’

The words were written with a somewhat cute handwriting, and there were a row of mystifying English words.

`It’s the only NEET thing to do`

My mind had already gone numb after the events that I’ve gone through today, so I won’t be surprised even if I see a NEET being a detective. I used the corner of the tray that held the ramen to press the electric bell, and the side camera modified into the electric bell flashed blue. According to Tetsu-senpai, that was the sign for ‘Come in’.

After opening the door, I saw that it was a long single room. As the air-conditioner was going strong, it was even colder than outside. Walking past the fridge, kitchen and washing machine in the corridor, a narrow room could be seen. As there were not any partitions in the room, a computer rack could be seen even from the entrance, while countless monitors filled the walls of the room.

“Your ramen is here……”

“Please enter.”

The voice of a young girl rang from inside of the room.

While holding the tray, I walked into the room. This room is really quite something. Three sides of the walls were covered with unknown machines, liquid plasma monitors and electric cables, while the small space left —— the floor in the middle of the room, was filled with a mattress. As though she was buried in dolls, the silhouette wearing pajamas turned around.

She looked just like a doll. She had a small face, a pair of large eyes that were in contrast with her face, unbelievably white skin, thin limbs, sleek hair flowing on the sheets, and was wearing pale blue pajamas with pictures of cartoon bears on it. I held the tray and stared at the girl.

The girl shifted the table that the keyboard was on aside, and pulled to her bed another long table that was just like those small tables that were used with the mattresses in a hospital.

“What are you standing there for? I ordered leek ramen. I don’t remember ordering a high school student-shaped ornament.”

“Ah, um…… Where should I put the ramen?”

“Since you're standing so far away, do you think that my arms seem like they’re long enough that I can take the bowls from your hands?”

I was scolded by her. But I do not even feel angry or surprised anymore. I placed the tray on the table in front of the girl. She took the disposable chopsticks, looked at it for awhile and breathed in deeply. Her small face was full of determination while the hands holding the tip of the chopsticks were applying force on it. But when the chopsticks were dragged into a ‘人’ shape, it just shook but did not separate. How little strength does this girl have?

“…… Would you like me to give you a hand?”

The cute girl wearing the pajamas was visibly glaring at me.

“It seems that you’re the type that sees a frail bird that couldn’t fly, tosses them upwards and sink in your own satisfaction after that, are you not? These type of people are the most useless of them all. When you walk away triumphantly, the bird would fall back down on the asphalt road and die, but you won’t even know that. Being dumb really should have a limit.”

It’s just a pair of disposable chopsticks, why am I scolded like this? But I did not retort her. Again, she breathed in deeply and applied force to separate the chopsticks.

Thwack.

The chopstick on the right has split into two. This is the most common result. She emotionlessly stared for awhile at the chopsticks with unequal length, and then started to cry. Hey, don’t cry!

She used the back of her hand to wipe away her tears, and started to eat the leek ramen(that pretty much has only leeks in it). As I was thinking of this, she started to glare at me again and said:

“Your interests are really out of my comprehension. Does silently watching people eat make you happy?”

“Ah, so- sorry.”

When I was about to walk out of the room, this time she said: “Where do you think you're going? If you are gone, who will dispose of the bowls? You should really think about this.” I scratched my head, and having no other choice, I squatted down at the entrance with my back to the mattress.

While listening to the girl wearing pajamas eating the onions, I mulled over the things that happened today. I'm just here because I couldn’t refuse Ayaka’s request…… Then, I encountered a lot of stuff. I'm really tired. As I was about to drift into sleep, the girl’s voice rang out yet again.

“Narumi, I’m done. Get some beverages for me from the fridge.”

Startled, I turned back to face the girl.

“Eh, huh?”

“I said, get me something to drink from the fridge. Falling asleep even in someone else’s house, you really are shameless.”

Who are you to say that about me? But still, I followed her instructions as I did not have the energy to retort. After opening the fridge, I found that it was stuffed full of 350ml red cans, and nothing else. I thought that all of them were Coke, but they were actually all Dr. Pepper. I don’t even have the energy to say anything anymore. The girl drank all of the Dr. Pepper that I brought her in one breath, and happiness welled out from her face. Seeing that expression made me feel that I could forgive everything.

“When God was creating the world, it was because He drank Dr. Pepper that He took a rest on the seventh day. If Dr. Pepper does not exist, there would be twelve days in a week instead of seven.”

“Is that so?”

“Narumi, you should drink it too! I can’t give you the ones in my

fridge, but I can tell you where you can get them."

So you're not giving them to me?

"…… Wait!" That was when I realized: "Why do you know my name?"

Was it when she was talking to Tetsu-senpai on the phone? No, at that moment Alice was just ordering her leek ramen, and she hung up right after she ordered. There wasn't any time for them to say my name.

"Fujishima Narumi, sixteen, male, 164cm tall, weighs 51kg, in class 1-4 of M high school……" She fluently spoke of all of my personal information —— address, phone number, educational background, and family background. I was speechless.

"Ayaka said that there was a new club member, so I just did a little investigation. There is so much information in your school, but so little protective measures, so it's better if you be more careful."

At a loss of words, I looked at the wall formed of computers.

"…… Are you a hacker?"

"I'm not a hacker."

The girl smiled while shaking her head.

"I'm a NEET detective."

The detective said, Alice was partly her real name, and partly an alias.

"Yuuko can also be read as Alice [6]. The name Alice was taken from James Tiptree's real name."

"Who is she?"

Alice sat on the mattress while hugging her knees, looking at me as though she was looking at an idiot.

“She’s a novelist! Didn’t you see the signboard at the door? Although I changed a letter, it was quite a famous quote! Haven’t you read of it before?”

I cocked my head, thinking of the English words on the signboard.

“The detectives that you speak of…… Don’t they just accept other people’s requests and investigate various cases?”

“I am not an ordinary detective, but a NEET detective. They are as different as Chofu and Den Enchofu, mind you. An ordinary detective asks around for information, monitors other people, all in all going here and there to search for information and find their target. NEET detectives, on the other hand……”

Alice puffed out her chest, turned around to the wall covered with machines and waved her hands.

“Do not need to leave their rooms even a step, but can search the whole world to find out the truth. You probably just think that I’m just a hikkikomori who’s overly reliant on the Internet, huh? You don’t need to lie.”

“Erm….. Yeah.”

“Hmph, that’s because the common man cannot understand the work of a detective. A detective is the messenger of the deceased, looking for the words lost from their graves, hurting the living for the sake of protecting the honor of the deceased, and condemning the dead for the sake of consoling the living. That is why this is such an unpopular and misunderstood occupation…… Is your expression questioning that why am I, as a hikkikomori, am saying all these?”

“No, my expression shouldn’t be that obvious.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“But you look like you have something to say. Don’t worry, just ask! Because of my occupation, I am already used to never ending

questions. And I will let you fall into despair very quickly."

…… Despair?

I don't really have anything much to ask, just that I'm a bit shocked by the endless chatter of this strange girl, Alice. But in this situation, it seems that I need to ask a question. Looking around the room that looks like a control room, I asked the question that was the most confusing to me.

"You…… What do you usually eat? Do you always eat that stuff?"

Alice's round eyes became even rounder.

"This trivial matter is the first thing that you thought of?"

"…… I think that what we eat is very important."

"Yes, you are correct. You are also an oddball, different from what Ayaka has said."

Alice narrowed her eyes while looking at me, as though she was smiling.

"To obtain the nutrients essential for my body, drinking Dr. Pepper would suffice. But Min-san is very persistent, so sometimes I eat some vegetables as well."

"So that's why you don't grow……"

"Where did your biased opinion that only tall people are good come from? I can list out fifty advantages for being a shorty and disadvantages of being tall, if you are willing to have a debate, I am always ready to accept the challenge."

"No, sorry."

I was just thinking about her height, which resulted in me mumbling to myself and getting heard.

"So do you depend on Min-san for your daily life?"

Alice raised her eyebrows.

“You’re really impolite, you know. I’ve already said that I’m a NEET detective, a NEET detective is an occupational detective! I have an actual income, and pay her for everything.”

“Eh, eh, but aren’t you a NEET?” aren’t all NEETs jobless?

“You misunderstood NEETs from a fundamental level. The second E in NEET is Employment, being employed by someone. My occupation is a personal enterprise, so I’m not employed. How other people view that depends.”

How other people would view.

“…… Lifestyle huh?”

“In Hiro’s life, that is so. Turgenev might say call it the ending of an illusion, Dostoyevsky might call it hell, William Somerset Maugham might call it reality, while Haruki Murakami might call it self. I use another name for it, but anyhow it’s unrelated to the matter of income.”

I have absolutely no idea what she is talking about, but the fact that the pajamas-clad girl earned money by being a detective is somewhat unbelievable. Which reminds me, she seems to be familiar with the usage of computers and the Internet.

“Your expression tells me that you don’t believe me. No matter, another man would come here in a moment to request for my investigation, you’ll probably believe it after you’ve heard it.”

“…… Huh?”

At that moment, the doorbell rang as she had predicted. I turned around and looked at the door.

“Open the door.”

“Me?”

“It would be nice if the agency adds some other way to welcome

guests besides the blue lights."

As I walked to the entrance to open the door, I froze as there were three men outside the door. The young man in the middle was wearing a leather coat and looked slightly older than me, but his expression was like that of a wild wolf. Among the other two who were flanking his sides, one was a man having muscles like a rocky mountain, the other was tall like an electric pole. Both of them were wearing the same gray hoodie.

"Who is this guy? Where's Alice?"

The wolf said. It was as though I was pierced by his sharp gaze, my lips trembled and I was unable to speak. At this moment, Alice's voice came from inside the room:

"Oh, Yondaime, please come in."

The two people behind the man who was called Yondaime said: "We'll wait here." And then I was dragged into the room. After the door was closed, the two men disappeared from my field of vision. At the moment when I was closing the door, I felt as if I was glared at, and my hands holding the door handle trembled.

"Narumi, get another can of Dr. Pepper."

Alice's voice finally peeled my hands off the door handle.

"Hey, who is that guy? Aren't we going to talk about the job?"

When I handed the Dr. Pepper to Alice, Yondaime who was sitting beside the mattress used his chin to point at me, and then turned around and said to me: "You, get out for a moment."

"Eh?"

Telling me to go outside the room to become best friends with the two bear-like bodyguards, and wait for you to finish discussing? What are you talking about!

"Yondaime, just imagine that there's a high school student-shaped ornament here, relax and start the discussion."

“Hey, Alice, are you joking? You should know that this isn’t something that you can let outsiders know!”

“It doesn’t matter, Narumi is only my assistant for today, I can guarantee that he will not speak of this to anyone else.”

I don’t even know when I’ve become an assistant.

“That's not the point.”

“If you’re so insistent, why don’t you talk so that outsiders wouldn’t understand? Your job has a lot of jargon anyway. If you would not want then, you can just give the request to some other people.”

An awkward expression appeared on Yondaime’s face and he used his foot to kick the bedstead. Finally, he sighed and started to talk.

Indeed, I could not understand a thing, it was all a bunch of unknown nouns and verbs that you couldn’t understand. The ones that I could barely understand “deal with him when we catch him”, are the ones that I really don’t want to understand.

“Hmm.”

Alice finished listening to Yondaime’s explanation and finished drinking her second can of Dr. Pepper.

“I understand. Narumi, do you understand what he just said?”

I hastily shook my head.

“Is that so? Basically, someone is doing unknown drug dealing behind Yondaime’s back, so he requested me to help find out about the ways that they deal drugs.”

“What is the use of me talking like that when you explain it to him!” Yondaime flew into a rage. That was quite understandable. I felt somewhat happy and thought: Great, finally someone would teach her a lesson…… “What is with that happy look on your face!” Yondaime’s changed his target of anger to me. I could only retreat to the corridor and hid behind the fridge.

“Well, as I had a big headache this morning, I wanted to enrage the first person who came in to vent my annoyace, whoever it was. Although Narumi was the first person to come in, but for some reason he is quite tolerant of it, and didn’t get angry at all.”

So she did all that on purpose!

“Coincidentally, the next person was you, so I vented my annoyance on you, so don’t mind it. If I did anything wrong, you’ll always get angry, and that’s why I like you the most.”

Alice stretched her legs out of the blanket and smiled sweetly. At this moment, I was totally defeated (Yondaime probably was, too). Yondaime hammered the blanket for some time, tried to say something but then stopped, and then he stood up.

“So are you willing to accept the request?”

“I accept it, so just leave it all to me!”

“I will mail the details to you, goodbye.”

Yondaime walked to the corridor and dragged me out from the fridge. He caught hold of my left shoulder and applied force on it until his thumb almost sank into my body.

“Ah, ouch…….”

“I’ve remembered your face, and will find out your address immediately. Listen closely, you didn’t hear anything just now. Is that clear?”

The wolfish eyes came closer to my eyes, while I could only nod while trembling.

“Answer me!”

“I…… I didn’t hear anything.”

Yondaime tossed me to the ground and walked out of the room.

“Are you alright?”

Alice came over and asked as I was huddled up on the floor in exhaustion. So she can walk? I thought that she had an illness that causes her to die if she leaves her bed.

“I just feel very tired.”

The words popped out of my mouth. That would be my feelings about what occurred the whole day.

“If I didn’t do so, I’m afraid you’ll still think that I’m a hikkikomori who’s over-reliant on the Internet. Don’t mind it!”

“No, I already understand clearly.”

Because of Ayaka, I stepped into an unbelievable world. Drug dealing, detectives and hackers, I had always hoped that these only exist in worlds that I don’t know of.

“You just wanted me to understand your work, so you said nonsensically that I’m your assistant and that I’m tight-lipped……”

“That is not nonsense. You are indeed tight-lipped, I am sure of it.”

I raised my head to look at Alice and saw that she was smiling. Since this is the first time that we’ve met, why does she dare to say so?

“Hey, Narumi. The people who met me, each and every one of them would ask: *‘Are you really a NEET? Why did you become a NEET?’*, and you are the first one who did not ask me this question.”

Adjusting to my eye level, Alice squatted down.

“Although it might be because you’re thoughtless or uncaring, but I -- we NEETs would be extremely happy. Instead of pitying us, ignoring us would have been better. 'Why did we become NEETs?', this question shouldn’t even be asked. Because there is only one reason – it is written on our page of God’s notebook: ‘We lose when we work.’ There is no other reason.”

“…… God’s notebook?”

“Isn’t this statement so irresponsible that it’s great?”

Placing her hands and chin on her knees, Alice said while smiling:

“What the word NEET really means, is actually not ‘Someone who doesn’t know how to do anything’, and not ‘Someone who doesn’t want to do anything’.”

*

Holding the empty bowl on the plate while walking out of the NEET Detective Agency, I saw that it was already completely dark outside. The starlight could not be seen as it was hidden by the piercing lights on the earth. The ramen shop below had become extremely crowded. Laughter and angry shouts coming from there could be heard even from here.

After I walked down the emergency backstairs, I found Yondaime sitting on the seat exclusively for NEETs that I was sitting on just now. Tetsu-senpai, Major, Hiro-san and Yondaime surrounded the wooden table, and looked like they were doing something together. The clear tinkle of a bell-like sound could be heard even from far away.

“Sou-san! Didn’t you say that you are only playing for five minutes!?”

The bodyguard, Rocky, who was standing behind Yondaime was shouting angrily by Yondaime’s ears.

“Shut up, how can I go back when I’m in a losing streak! Tetsu, hurry up and throw already!”

“Okay, four five and six.”

“Impossible!”

A large bundle of money was on the bowl. So they’re playing a game of dices. Do these four know each other?

“Fujishima-kun, Min-san made a flavored ice cream, do you want to

try some?”

Ayaka ran out holding an ice cream cone. While licking the ice cream which was giving out a fragrant aroma, I listened to the dice tinkling along in the bowl. Yondaime was shouting with his whole face red, throwing his cash onto the bowl like a ninja throwing knives. Looking at this situation, I couldn’t help but feel – somewhat happy.

*

On the way home, the streetlights on the street was very dim. Walking in front of me, Ayaka turned around and said:

“I’m so sorry, I did say that I wanted to have a welcome party for you, but coincidentally the shop was busy……”

Speaking of which, I don’t think I’ve talked much with Ayaka today at the shop. There were so many customers that even I helped to deliver.

“Oh yeah, did you see Alice?”

“Yeah…… She’s an oddball.” I couldn’t say anything else about her.

“But it was really unbelievable today. There are indeed a lot of interesting people behind the ramen shop, but its rare that all of them were present like today! You’re so lucky, Fujishima-kun.”

“Does that count as lucky?”

Indeed, the people that I met and the faces that I’ve seen today has far exceeded my brain capacity, but I still remembered all of them. Tetsu-senpai, Min-san, Major, Hiro-san, Alice and Yondaime.

“It would be even better if Onii-chan could come.”

Onii-chan?

“After my brother left school, he became a NEET. He usually goes to the ramen shop to hang out with Tetsu-senpai and the others. But

recently he didn't even go home or to the shop. I couldn't even reach his phone."

"You can't really say that all of those who hang out there don't have a job……?"

A horrible illusion came upon me. Would I turn out like them when I leave school someday?

Ayaka turned around and said: "Did you ever think of leaving school?"

"Every day."

Under the streetlight, an inscrutable expression appeared on Ayaka's face.

"…… Even now?"

I was momentarily speechless. Being unable to immediately answer this question is indeed strange.

Ayaka gazed sincerely at me.

I averted her gaze and lied: "Now…… I don't want to……. Probably!"

"Is that so." A gentle smile appeared on Ayaka's face.

"But I think you have no need to lie right now."

I stopped walking, speechless, and Ayaka stopped too. Coincidentally, we were standing in the middle of two streetlights, while our shadows interlaced on the asphalt road.

"…… Why?"

I could only say this one word. Why? How did she know that I was lying?

"Because…… That place originally belonged to me." Ayaka said. "It was because there were no other members that I entered the

Gardening Club. So in this case, I'm your senior for about half a year!"

I pondered the reason why Ayaka can smile while saying such a thing. Because she is different from me, and can chat with the other students in our class as if nothing had happened, it seemed as natural as breathing.

Hearing me speak of my true thoughts, she showed me a glass-like smile that was even more transparent.

"It's really simple, you can do it as well. Shout when you're angry like the others, laugh when you're happy like the others, and speak your mind when you want something."

I lowered my head, and thought repeatedly about what Ayaka meant by her words. I still don't get it. I just felt that her words was like that of a busybody, although its contents completely suits my current situation.

After we crossed the bridge, Ayaka and I said goodbye to each other.

Looking at the silhouette of Ayaka running towards the station, I thought of a scene when she was shouting or laughing like the others. Wasn't she just pushing herself? Does she mean that I should do that as well? Forcing myself to talk to the other students, forcing myself to smile.

I wish that she would not care about me anymore. I just couldn't do what she said anyhow.

Chapter 2

However, I was still a member of the Gardening Club after a week when December began; that was because Ayaka captured me after school every day for club activities. Why must she keep bothering me? I don't even know, and I thought my head was going to burst open.

As I did not have any knowledge about gardening, I still had to stick to the railings while blankly looking at the streets as usual. That day, the brilliant blue skies trailed across the horizon. There were only two or three clouds in the skies like stickers stuck onto the sky, dazzling anyone who dared to stare at it for a long period of time.

I had always wanted to ask Ayaka: "Why did you say all that on the day when we were on the way home from the ramen shop?" However, since I could not think of a suitable question to ask, I could only continue looking at the view opposite to the railings.

“Seriously, you should really give me a hand!”

Ayaka said while puffing out her cheeks and holding a pair of scissors used for pruning.

“…… I don’t even know what to do, and the flowers have already been watered.”

“Then help me use the ampoule on the trees, one for each plant.”

Ayaka handed the ampoule fertilizer to me. The ampoule was like a small bottle of soy sauce that comes with a sumptuous bento, just that there weren't soy sauce inside, but a yellowish-green liquid.

“Opening an ampoule is quite hard! If the opening is too big, the fertilizer would spill out too quickly; the ones that I open are actually done with professional-level skill.”

Ayaka said triumphantly while using her scissors to cut off a little of

the the tip of the ampoule.

“I’ll be in charge of cutting, while you just stick them into the pot.”

“I hate work.”

I mumbled complaints while turning the ampoule over to stick it into the pot.

“You probably don’t hate work, just that you can’t imagine yourself working!”

“Hime-sama, why are you so sharp about these things?” I got flustered and accidentally blurted out honorifics.

“Because my brother has said similar things before. He said that he doesn’t know why we must work if we want to live, so he left school halfway through high school. He didn’t even find a job, and just went here and there without an objective.”

Don’t know why we have to work if we want to live… Indeed, I feel so too. If such a day would come upon me, would I really accept the fact that I need to work in order to continue living? Or would I become one of the guys behind Hanamaru Ramen?

I shuddered, denying the horrendous imagination of my future, and shifted my attention to sticking the ampoules into the pots. It was already past flowering season; many dry leaves and branches could be found lying on the ground. Now is the time to prepare for the next flowering season.

“If I misunderstood, I apologize now to you first. But I think that you and my brother probably have an illness that is worse than hating work.”

“Eh?” So this is an illness?

“For instance, some people hate to eat carrots or celery when they are little, but they eat them as adults! But if I tell you to eat boots or diamonds, that can’t be achieved for eternity. This isn’t a problem of liking or hating: they cannot be eaten even as an adult.”

“Do you mean to say: ‘I cannot imagine myself eating carrots or celery,’ huh?”

“Exactly.”

“Your analogy makes me feel down.”

“Cheer up!” Ayaka patted my back. Oh please, the person who made me feel down was you in the first place!

“The people at ‘Hanamaru’ seems to like Fujishima-kun a lot, probably because you guys give off the same aura! Tetsu-senpai told me to take you there again.”

“I had already decided to never go there again.” If I continue to go, I would definitely become one of them sooner or later.

“Please go! Everyone’s waiting for you!”

Which quality in me do they admire? I almost never spoke to others willingly, so my social skills are quite poor!

“You are not as introverted as an armadillidium like you thought!”

“Really?” I didn’t say that I’m like an armadillidium.

“That’s right, and you keep talking to yourself.”

I accidentally stuck the ampoule onto my shoes.

“Do…… Do I often talk to myself?”

“Oh yes, I think that’s why you could communicate with them. Are you okay? You look terrible!”

I probably couldn’t function anymore.

“But if you don’t speak your mind, nobody would understand you!”

“I always forget how to communicate.” I answered randomly. But when I think about it, things are indeed so. Ayaka stared at me for awhile, and sighed.

“Then you should practice! Right?”

*

In the end, I still couldn't refuse her, and could only follow Ayaka to the ramen shop. That day, there wasn’t anyone behind "Hanamaru’s" kitchen door. Although it was already evening, there weren’t any customers there.

“So you’re here again, Narumi?”

A surprised expression appeared on Min-san’s face, and she said so while cutting cabbages, glaring at me as well. As I saw before this, she wore a vest while her breast was covered up with a sarashi, her appearance looked as if people could easily take advantage of her.

“Forget it, I thought that you would turn out like that the last time we met.”

“Turn out how?”

“It’s still not too late!” Min-san said just that. What does she mean by not too late?

“If you just practice your communication skills, you probably would not become a NEET.”

After saying that, Ayaka went into the kitchen and put on an apron. I sighed, and sat down on a gas tank. Say whatever you want!

“Oh yeah, do you want to work part time here too, Fujishima-kun?”

Min-san replied immediately: “Narumi looks like he doesn’t know how to do anything, the shop doesn’t need these type of people.”

Discouraged, I took a spoon and stirred my coffee ice cream. Min-san took a bowl and poked her head out of the kitchen.

“That’s right, there’s still something that you can do.”

“What is it?”

“Take this to Alice.”

It was Japanese styled Dan Dan Noodles filled with vegetables, but this time, some noodles could be seen in the sea of vegetables.

“The last time you delivered it, Alice ate them all. Before that, she usually doesn’t finish them, so please help today too. If there’s anything left in the bowl, I’ll beat you up!”

*

“What is this? I ordered Dan Dan Noodles, but without noodles, carrots, mushrooms or meat.”

Alice puffed out her cheeks, eyeing the food in the bowl in displeasure.

That day, the air-conditioning in the detective agency was still very cold, but Alice was just wearing pajamas with teddy bears on it. Won’t she be cold like this?

“But there are obviously noodles, meat and other stuff in it! Please tell me a reason for me to eat this.”

“Min-san is worried that you will have malnutrition.”

“Oh, so there’s a standard for malnutrition? Then please enlighten me about this standard of yours. Let me make this clear, having lived for over ten years on only Dr. Pepper, I will not listen to unreasonable excuses, and don’t try to use a bad excuse to convince me. I will eliminate your arguments completely.”

I sighed. Although I wasn’t sure if Alice was a detective or not, but this little girl really had a lot to say. I’ve already known that I couldn’t convince her, so I quickly used the secret technique that Min-san taught me.

“Min-san said that you can’t have ice cream if you don’t finish them.”

Alice’s froze, and her lips started to tremble.

“…… So-so despicable…… According to Act 222 of the penal code, this can already be count as a threat, and violates the Competition law for refusing to sell as well.”

The teary-eyed Alice waved her hands, listing out one suspicious law after another. As I found it interesting, I watched Alice’s actions silently temporarily.

She probably gave up, huh? Alice picked up her chopsticks while pouting.

“Get me some Dr. Pepper! Three cans of them!”

“Do you want to drink them after eating?”

“I want to eat while drinking! How can carrots and meat be eaten directly?”

Alice, who was holding a dark red can in one hand while eating Dan Dan Noodles teary-eyed, was really worth watching.

“Stop scrutinizing me!”

Alice swiftly finished her first can of Dr. Pepper, picked up the empty can and threw it at me, while I could only hold in my laughter while turning my back on her. But Alice really is a picky eater! Is she really from Earth?

“What do you do when eating nutrition lunch at school? Didn’t you get scolded?”

I suddenly thought about that and asked Alice.

Alice was silent for awhile, and then she answered me:

“I have never been to a school.”

“Eh?”

"Although I know what a nutrition lunch is, I have never entered any educational institutions from birth.”

I didn't think that Alice had a normal life, but I never would have thought that she haven't even went to primary school.

"According to Tetsu, the NEETs who haven't even graduated from primary school are on the highest level of them all. Hmph, I am completely uninterested in these rankings."

Even so, I have this faint feeling that if Alice went to school like other people do, she would think that a normal life is very uninteresting as well.

"No such thing, I will not look down on normal things."

I was startled and turned my head over. It looks like I accidentally spoke my inner thoughts again.

"I was really determined to finish primary school and middle school. Even though I hate ignorance, it is completely irrelevant to normalcy. Going to school is an experience that I never had, and that is also my regret. But when people who are the same age as me are going for mandatory education, what do you think I was doing?"

Alice paused to put a piece of noodle in her mouth, soured her face and gulped it down with some Dr. Pepper. It looks like she is asking for my opinion.

"Learning how to be a good wife?"

Alice nearly spat the food out of her mouth.

"…… Your sense of humor is indeed perplexing, it's no wonder that you are excluded from other people. I pity you very much."

I'm now pitied, but what Alice said was the truth.

"So what's the correct answer?"

"Eh? Ah, the answer is as you see——opening windows in the network world, observing the limited and twisted world."

Alice's gaze fell on the black machines that covered up the whole

wall behind her.

"…… Every day?"

"The 'every day' that I meant is worse than you imagine. My life consisted of only saving information into my body, and washing away my helplessness by drinking Dr. Pepper. I kept searching for the meaning of my existence. Do you know this? On Earth, a child dies because of poverty every 3.6 seconds, and actually all of this is *'my fault'*."

"…… Ah?"

I couldn't help but exclaim in surprise. What nonsense is she spouting?

"This is purely a hypothetical problem. Listen, if I have enough resources and ways to produce food, I can save the starving children. I am not worried about poverty, and I am not a holy person. I repeat, this is purely a hypothetical problem. If I have enough power, I can save the children who are gradually dying, so the death of the children is due to the fact that I do not have enough power to save them. Similarly, when a plane is kept hostage by terrorists and hits a building, it is because I do not have the power to stop it; The harm that is caused due to earthquakes or tsunamis is because I do not have the power to predict them."

Purely a hypothetical problem.

But in that case, wouldn't that mean everything that happened is Alice's fault?

"That is how I passed my days, using my time to confirm my helplessness. To be exact, it should be about eight years or so, huh? I want to know what a powerless person like me can do for this world, for instance, to do something for the people who died hopelessly, or I cannot do anything for them at all."

Using eight years. It's just too stupid.

"Because I felt some limitations, I ran away from home. I sealed myself in a new fortress, and continued to open windows in this

world. Hehe, actually I'm now in pursuit by my family, so I have no choice but to open a window in the real world."

Alice laugh self-deprecatingly, and looked at the countless cubical monitors at the right side of her bed. Although the monitors were small, I could not see what it was. It was not until the curtains of 'Hanamura' appeared on the monitor that I realized that it was the view of the surroundings of the building. There were six live videos that were taken from surveillance cameras, including the space between this building and the next, and also their interiors.

"Being pursued…..?

"As the people in my family aren't stupid, they probably know where I am hiding already. This is just as a precaution for them from using unorthodox methods to look for me! I ran away from home, running away from my helplessness and from the world that is gradually lost because of my powerlessness…… But even so I couldn't find the answer to that, so……"

I looked at Alice's face, taken aback.

This girl is serious, although I thought that the things that she said was just a joke.

"So I chose to become a detective."

"…… Sorry, your words confuse me, I don't get it."

"You don't understand? In this world, there are only two jobs that can help those who are dead or have lost something, a novelist and a detective: A novelist can revive them in their dreams, detectives can dig out the real message from their graves. This is what leaders of a religion, a politician, a burial agency or the firefighters can't do."

I could not say anything that moment. Alice lowered her head in loneliness, using her chopsticks to swirl the food in her bowl.

"But sometimes I still feel somewhat queasy. A detective can only take action on things that have already been lost, right? They cannot solve the things that have not happened, or dig a grave that

has not been made yet. So for people who might be hurt in the future, I am still powerless."

After that, Alice became silent and shifted her attention to the food left in her bowl. Ashamed, I turned away from her yet again. The sound of Alice chewing the cabbage sounded sorrowful, for some reason.

After a very long time, Alice finally cleared away the food in the bowl. I silently handed her the vanilla ice cream that I kept hidden for some time, but Alice just placed it on the table, not even touching it, but raised her head to look at my face.

"Eh…… Is there something wrong?"

"Nothing, I just felt inconceivable, to why I would tell you so much."

I felt mystified too, never had I thought that Alice would tell me so much about herself, making me feel a bit worried about the future of this pajamas clad girl—— even though I am absolutely not qualified to be worried for other people.

"You can just tell me what you think! I don't mind."

"Okay." Although I hesitated, I still spoke my mind honestly, because I know how hurtful a white lie can be. "What you said was too abstract, I have absolutely no idea what you said."

I thought Alice would throw a second empty can at me, but instead she laughed out loud. Alice, with her long, black hair that has become unruly, said while wiping away the tears at the corner of her eyes:

"What an interesting fellow you are. Just listening to Ayaka's description of you, I thought that you were a hopeless person! It seems that it is not so."

"Ayaka…… said something about me to you?"

"Hmph, so you mind? That's surprising. I thought you have absolutely no interest in other people."

Alice started to laugh mischievously.

“Of course I don’t mind.” I couldn’t help but retort.

“Really? Then I don’t have any reason to tell you.”

I bit my lower lip, finding that I was starting to get restless. Of course I mind how Ayaka sees me. As if she had seen through my thoughts, Alice finally answered.

“…… Ayaka said that you are similar to Toshi.”

“Toshi? Who is that?”

“He’s Ayaka’s brother! He’s also a drop out who always hangs out with Tetsu and the others, but he’s not here lately. Which reminds me, useless, doesn’t speak when he’s in a bad mood, always talking to himself and always giving trouble to Ayaka, these qualities of his are extremely similar to you.”

What Alice said is really too over. When I thought about the situation when Ayaka was describing her brother, a complicated feeling came upon me. So it was because Ayaka was worried of me, who is similar to her brother, which compelled her to invite me into the Gardening Club? I couldn’t help but think that the things that I think about is quite silly.

“You don’t need to worry, you’re not that much alike, and also you’re not a NEET.” Alice said to me, who was silent. “Toshi is not as stubborn as you, at least……”

Alice suddenly stopped talking, her eyes glued to the monitor beside her bed.

“…… Is something the matter?”

“Well, speak of the devil. Here’s Toshi.”

“Eh?”

“Why did he come out from inside?”

Following Alice's lead, I stared at the monitor, which was showing a skinny silhouette at the third box from the right. The surroundings of the gas tanks that could be seen at the bottom left corner of the screen was filmed from above, where the NEETs like to gather. The silhouette wearing a dark blue hoodie was standing at the gap between the buildings, not even moving an inch.

"Narumi, go catch that fellow for me. He probably just wants to go back like this."

"Why……"

"Because Ayaka is worried about him. Don't ask anymore, just hurry!"

*

When I walked down the ladder, the silhouette was walking further into the gap with his back to me. I pushed away the hill of garbage bags while running towards him.

"Hey!"

The silhouette donning a sports jacket shook for a moment, and then turned his head over. He had a thin, pale face, and had a nervous expression behind his spectacles that wandered here and there. It was obvious that he was Ayaka's brother, as their eyes were identical. Seeing as he was so nervous, I, who originally wanted to talk to him, could not think of anything to say.

"Onii-chan?"

Ayaka's voice rang in the alley. I turned around, and saw Ayaka, who was wearing an apron, poke half of her body out of the kitchen.

Ayaka's brother —— Toshi sighed, as if he has given up on something.

"You could just give us a call before you come here."

“My phone service has been cancelled, because I didn’t pay up.”

Ayaka dragged Toshi out of the gap between the buildings, and stealthily took some cash out of her wallet and handed it to him. Whoa, there’s actually such a useless brother, I could only pretend not to see anything.

Toshi, who went back to the ramen shop, sat on the ladders and said towards the kitchen: “Min-san, give me an ice cream! I’m parched.” Min-san, who walked out of the kitchen, knitted her brows, peered at Toshi and said: “You probably ate some strange stuff again, didn’t’ you? If you eat cold things you’ll throw up.” She returned to the kitchen after saying that.

Ayaka said: “ Onii-chan, wait for me awhile, I’ll make something hot for you to eat.” And she returned to the kitchen after saying that too.

Toshi smacked his lips, and then took out a small plastic bag out of his pockets, broke the pills in the plastic bag into half, crushed them, swallowed it down without even a drink of water, and then stared at me after he finished eating the medicine.

“Ayaka told me about you some time ago, so you’re in the same club?”

Toshi finally said to me, and I nodded a bit nervously.

“Oh really, so you’re Narumi.”

I thought to myself, what did Ayaka say to Toshi?

“She’s very dumb, being together with her is hard, isn’t it?”

I shook my head. Toshi looked at the winter sky that was full of clouds and gave a hollow laugh, his laughter felt like someone using a cold metal stick to scratch his back.

After that our conversation came to a stop. Toshi hunched his back, and then stuck his hands into the pockets of his sports jacket. His eyes wandered while starting to shake his legs. I secretly observed Toshi from the side.

Is he really that similar to me?

I dunno, maybe it really is that similar? He was older than me by about one or two years, but his skin looked dry, coarse and pale. No wonder Ayaka would be worried about him.

“Oh? How rare for you to turn up here!”

A voice suddenly sounded behind us. I turned my head around, and saw Tetsu-senpai wearing a short-sleeved T-shirt as usual, Hiro-san was wearing a leather jacket, while Major wore what seemed like clothes for the Siberian garrisons. The three walked into the gap between the buildings together.

“Toshi, what were you doing before this?”

“Nothing, I’m just busy with a lot of things.”

Facing Tetsu-senpai’s questions, Toshi averted his gaze and answered mysteriously.

Tetsu-senpai looked at me and then looked at Toshi, and said:” Narumi’s here again! That way, the three drop outs are all here, NEETs who graduated from middle school are truly the best!”

“I haven’t dropped out yet, don’t group me together with you guys!”

My objections were completely ignored.

“It’s because Tetsu-san say things like this, NEETs-in-waiting would increase! We can’t wait until he drops out, we must figure out a way for him to drop out willingly!” “The one who graduated from high school, you’re too noisy! Wanna have a fight?” Major and Tetsu-senpai started to argue for some reason.

“It’s rare that Toshi is here, since we haven’t gone to the arcade for a long time, lets go together!” Hiro-san suggested. “I learnt a new chain technique, and can use a new killer technique, so I can defeat Toshi now!”

“Eh, I don’t want to, aiyo!”

Toshi was unwilling to go, but his arms were held by Tetsu-senpai, and was forced to stand up.

“Will you come with us, Narumi?”

“To where?” Ayaka flew out of the kitchen in a hurry.

Hiro-san smiled and said: “The arcade.”

“Is Onii-chan going too?”

“Let’s go quickly!”

As if he found the situation hassling, Toshi looked at Ayaka for a moment and then quickly walked to the main streets.

*

**I was brought to the arcade at the shopping center of the station. The first floor was filled with crane games and sticker making machines, while half of the second floor was occupied by large music game machines, online games and racing games. The older games were all squeezed in a corner.

Toshi was really good in fighting games, Tetsu-senpai and Hiro-san challenged him in turn, but still couldn’t defeat him.

Major dragged Toshi to a Gundam fighting machine and challenged him with brimming confidence, but was also completely defeated. Toshi, who was controlling Sac II, had superhuman-like senses, making people think that he had another pair of eyes behind his back. Toshi did not want to play at the start, but his eyes became somewhat eerie after winning a few matches, and he also made strange noises. Having a six time winning streak while playing with Major, I originally thought that Toshi would again make the annoying laugh again, but his face suddenly turned green, said ‘I’m going to the washroom for awhile’, and left his game that was playing halfway.

“…… That guy, seems like he’s in trouble again.” Tetsu-senpai said worriedly.

“In trouble?”

“He once bought legal medicine from the Internet before. (Note: Legal medicine- drugs. Is not legal at all, and is said to be legal by the sellers who are doing promotions)”

I recalled the pills that Toshi swallowed just now, would that be the legal medicine that Tetsu-senpai said? I started to get a bit worried.

“I’ll go check out Toshi’s condition.”

Toshi walked out of the washroom with a sickly expression on his face, the corner of his lips were wet, and smelled somewhat sour. He probably threw up.

Toshi said: “I’ll go outside to get some fresh air.” I was still worried, so I followed him out.

Under the setting sun, the road was full of cars, Bing Crosby’s Christmas song and the red green lights of the decoration could be seen and heard in the sidewalk that was full of people. Toshi sat down on the stone steps outside the arcade, and drank the Fanta carbonated water that he bought from the automatic vendor. Toshi’s eyes wandered again, making people feel queasy.

“…… Are you okay?”

“They look as if they’re not moving.”

“Eh?”

“The people look as if they’re not moving. It’s true, I can even see the movement of a dot. Even if I close my eyes, and just listen to the noise, I could win.”

After saying that, he laughed, giving no thought to the people walking around.

“Do you always hang out with Tetsu and the guys?”

Toshi said while having hiccups.

“No…… I only came to know them recently.”

“But you look like you’re very close to them.”

Toshi laughed again. Do I look like I’m very close to them?

“…… It was because I often skip school to go to the arcades, then I gradually became closer to them. They taught me a lot of things, so why don’t you go play fighting games too! I can teach you the next time.”

I felt a bit shy, and dropped my gaze to look at my knees. If I can play like this everyday, even if I’m kicked out of school, even if I become a NEET, then —— it isn’t really a bad thing.

“Toshi, would you still come to ‘Hanamaru’ after this?”

“Eh? Ah….. Hmmm, yes, right, I’ve already……”

Facing my questions, Toshi looked like he was looking far away.

“Forgot, because I didn’t meet them for quite a long time already……”

Toshi suddenly stopped talking, and started to cough violently. After he stopped coughing, he was still breathing heavily, his hunched back rocking up and down. I didn’t know what to do, and can only rub his back covered by the sports jacket.

Toshi used his trembling hands to take out a plastic bag from his pockets, this time he swallowed a pill with a gulp of Fanta. I tried to stop him, but it was too late. The carbonated drink spilled onto Toshi’s jeans, but he doesn’t seem to mind. The people passing by stared at us.

Toshi’s body finally stopped trembling.

“…… Angel Fix.”

“What is that?”

“This! Great name, isn’t it!? It brings you to heaven.”

Toshi pressed the remaining two pills left in the bag to my face. I could see a picture of wings and the letters A.F engraved on the small pink pills.

“Do you want it? I could sell it to you for a discount.”

“No thanks…… That isn’t normal medication, is it?”

“That doesn’t matter. It isn’t a drug, the others are just making a big fuss out of nothing, this is just a legal medication.”

I swallowed my saliva in anguish.

“Why? This type of medicine……”

“You ask me why? You, you……” What Toshi is saying started to get muddled up. “Why do you think humans live in this world?”

I don’t know what Toshi meant by suddenly saying this, so I could only remain silent.

“In a human’s brain, there is a type of thing called the compensation nervous system, which is what we call the A10 nervous system. When we eat tasty stuff, we are praised by other people or have bought something that we want, the system would synthesize neurotransmitters, and change it into signals so that we would have a blissful feeling. In contrast, schizophrenia or depression is usually caused by a decrease in dopamine. In short, no matter how hard we try to pursue happiness, if the brain does not synthesize neurotransmitters properly, we would not feel happy, so the reason we continue to live is to stimulate the A10 nervous system.”

I didn't say anything, but only stared at Toshi’s face. I could see that Toshi was not focused on me anymore, does he know who he is talking to? It was as if he was a different person from the Toshi just now, and has become very garrulous.

“That is why, we could just depend on medication! It’s straightforward, easy and you could feel pleasure straightaway. You don’t need to work hard to earn money, and don’t need to look for girls to marry, we can achieve the same results just depending on

the medication. But The process is not the same, no pain and not time-consuming. Medication is perfect. For instance, people like me, kicked out of high school, fired at work, has only graduated from middle school and could not find any work, but I don't really feel like looking for a job anyway. Only angels would not look down on me, that's what this is all about."

Toshi raised the plastic bag containing the pink pills to cover the glaring streetlights in the night. I couldn't help but take hold of his shoulders and start to shake him.

"I'm alright, it hurts, stop shaking me."

I'm alright, I'm alright, as if following a beat for a song, Toshi kept repeating this sentence.

"That's right, I have something to ask you, did you see some yakuzas that are about the same age as us at the ramen shop recently?"

"…… Do you mean Yondaime?"

I told Toshi about Yondaime visiting Alice's room.

"What the heck, so you even know about Yondaime and Alice! That's good, I just wanted to know about this thing. Hahaha, you've completely become one of them now!"

Toshi strolled towards the sidewalk, laughing maniacally at the night skies. The people passing by knitted their brows and walked far away from us, forming a space shaped like a half circle.

"Does Ayaka get along with the others?"

I nodded.

"Isn't she somewhat lonesome at school?"

"Although she's a bit eccentric, Ayaka isn't the same as me, she can happily talk to our classmates naturally."

"Is that so? Why is that, I wonder? She once refused to go to school

when she was in middle school, why is that? When did she become a normal person again? And she even wanted to drag me to school too. I just couldn't do it, it's not that I like not going to school. She flew into a temper when I said that I wanted to drop out, really, nagging me should have its limits."

After listening to this, I, who was sitting down, froze. While laughing boisterously, Toshi walked into the crowd, going towards the main road. Seeing Toshi disappear in the sea of people, I could only stare at the view in a daze.

In the din of the crowd, Toshi's scary, screeching laughter could still be heard. I hastily stood up, pushing away the crowd and went after him. This is not good. Although I don't know why, I felt that a problem is going to arise.

The people nearby also seemed to sense what I have felt from the laughter. Toshi walked unsteadily on the road, and a circular space formed beside him, as if he was wearing a large, invisible float. The crowd stopped moving, causing me to be unable to get close to Toshi.

It was like Toshi was enclosed in an inexplicable membrane, springing towards the zebra crossing while the lights were yellow. The yellow light changed to red in a flash, and the drivers started sounding their horn at Toshi. He unsteadily walked to the other side of the zebra crossings while laughing, and I, who was standing at the other side, could not do anything but keep my eyes on him.

The crowd who was waiting for the light to change to green made a small noise, but Toshi's silhouette vanished in only a moment in the impatient horns and the cars that were passing the junction. As soon as Toshi's silhouette disappeared, everyone seemed to have forgot about the scary laughter. The people in this city is very tolerant of oddballs, because things will be endless if they care about each and every one of them.

Even so, a man kept staring at Toshi with a smile on his face, until Toshi vanished. The man was very young, and was waiting for the lights to change by my side. He donned a high class Kashmir wool coat, has thin cheeks, and had a pair of frameless glasses on his face

with a sharp chin.

Our gazes locked for a moment, and that was enough for me to shiver. I don't know why, but I could feel that there is something hidden deep in his eyes that makes me feel queasy.

Music rang from the pockets of the man's coat, it was a steady sound of a plucking guitar. He took out his phone and answered it: "Hello…… Yes, I've found Shinozaki, I'll go back as soon as I pick him up. Hmm? Keep the distillation locked up first, and wait for me to go back.. Continue to put them in separate packs, you know that our stocks aren't enough, don't you? That's right, yeah……"

The voice that could never be forgotten even though it is only heard once, gave people an unpleasant feeling like thorns. The man started to walk while talking on the phone, while I was pushed by the people at the back, and nearly fell down on the streets.I hurriedly caught hold of the railings at the side of the sidewalk. The traffic light changed to green when I didn't notice, so the crowd rushed out to the zebra crossings.

But I could not move. The man's words left an unforgettable impression on me, causing my legs to tremble, unable to move even one step.

The man indeed said: "Shinozaki." Does he know Toshi? But who on Earth is he?

A bad premonition flashed across my mind.

"Hey! Where's Toshi? Where has he gone?"

A voice spoke to me, who was standing at the end of the street, not knowing what to do. Turning my head to the voice, Tetsu-senpai, Hiro-san and Major were all there.

"…… I don't know where he ran off to."

I finally said. After telling them about Toshi's condition, a dumbfounded expression appeared on Tetsu-senpai's face, and he scratched his head.

“Don’t go crazy on the streets after taking drugs, that idiot……”

Major said: “Should we go find him?”

Hiro-san shook his phone: “But I can’t get to his phone!”

Almost at the same time, the three looked at the street that was full of people. It was impossible to look for anyone on this street. Even so, Tetsu-senpai lightly patted my head.

“Narumi, you go back to ‘Hanamaru’ first and deal with Ayaka.”

“B- But……”

“Don’t make her feel too worried. We’ll go look for Toshi.”

I didn’t even have enough time to answer him, then the three vanished in the crowd, looking for Toshi.

*

After returning to the ramen shop, I found that the shop was pitch dark, and there was not even one customer, while Ayaka could not be seen anywhere as well. Min-san was stirring the butter in a large bowl.

“I told Ayaka, since there’s no customers today, she could go home first. But she said that Toshi might come back, so she’s waiting upstairs.”

“Upstairs as in Alice’s agency?”

“Yeah.”

Ayaka sat on the mattress of the agency, and she let Alice sit on her thighs, combing Alice’s long hair.

“Is Onii-chan gone already? Where is he?”

“Ayaka, it hurts, you’ve pulled my hair.” Alice moved her neck in

protest.

“Ah, so sorry.”

Ayaka wasn’t really tall, but in comparison you could see that Alice was very petite, almost like a real doll.

“Did Onii-chan say where he lives right now?”

“…… I’m not really sure.”

I couldn’t answer her properly. Getting delirious after taking drugs, and then disappearing, it was really hard to tell people about this kind of stuff.

“What a headache, he should at least tell me how to contact him!”

But it seemed like Toshi found Ayaka troublesome. Is that what he really thought? Or is it some nonsense that he said after taking drugs?

“Ayaka, just don’t care about that specky, ignorant guy who suddenly disappeared. Blood relation is the first stupid cornerstone of belief that humans should break.”

“Alice, don’t turn around!”

“(sobs)” Alice wanted to turn her head around to face Ayaka, but Ayaka held Alice’s head, so she could not move her head, causing Alice to look terrible.

“And if you would also not care about my hair, I would be very happy.”

“That wouldn’t do! You have such beautiful, luscious long hair, if you don’t comb it properly, it would become unruly very soon. The shampoo and conditioners that I gave you, did you use them?”

“Really, there should be a limit to being a busybody!

Alice made a disgruntled noise, but still sat on Ayaka’s thighs. There is a type of person in this world that are busybodies, and could not

leave other people alone. Ayaka was one of them. That would probably be it.

When I was about to walk out of the agency, Ayaka said that she wanted to go home too.

While walking down the ladder, the ringtone of a phone rang from Ayaka's bag.

"…… Hello?"

"Hello, Ayaka? It's me……"

Toshi, who was on the phone was very loud, so loud that even I can hear him. The effects of the drug is probably still there, his voice sounded inexplicably cheerful.

"Onii-chan?"

"This is Hakamizaka-san's phone, so I can't talk to you so long. I'm at his place right now, so help me to tell mother."

"Ah, but Onii-chan……"

He hung up suddenly, just like when he called just now. Ayaka silently looked at her phone, and then looked at me, showing me a troubled smile. I turned my head away.

"Was it Toshi?"

"Yeah. It seems like he's at Hakamizaka's."

Hakamizaka?

"Yeah—— I've only seen him two or three times, so we're not that close. He's probably a university student. He's very knowledgeable about poppy flowers, so probably he'll become a scholar, huh?"

"So do you know where they are right now?"

"No, I don't know and the phone number was private too…… I couldn't call him again. Onii-chan is too over."

Ayaka sadly knitted her brows, placing her phone back into her bag.

“He’s like this every time, always disappearing without saying a thing.”

I thought to myself: "That’s probably because he thinks that you’re troublesome." Ayaka looked at me and cocked her head.

“What did you say just now?”

I faked a ‘ididn’tsayanything’ expression. I’ve probably let slip my inner thoughts again.

“…… Onii-chan probably said something to you, didn’t he? I know that you’re hiding something from me.”

I silently lowered my head.

“Really, why won’t you tell me?”

I swallowed, and raised my head.

“…… I’ve heard that you refused to go to school when you were in middle school.”

Why did I ask this question? Ayaka’s expression froze, and an anxious, unnatural smile appeared on her face, showing that she wanted to hide something.

“A- About me, huh? Eh, um, that is……”

Toshi can’t be helped now, but if it was me——

“Do you think that I could still be saved?”

“…… What do you mean by that?”

I turned my back to Ayaka and walked quickly down the ladder. Even I do not know what I was talking about, why would I say such a thing?

“Fujishima-kun!”

I ignored Ayaka's shouts and ran out of the building. On the way home, Ayaka and Toshi's words muddled together, swirling in my mind.

*

The next day, I planned to skip the fifth and sixth period of Chemistry and go home straightaway. That was because I wasn't ready to speak to Ayaka alone.

But when break time started, the guys nearby started to come and chat with me, causing me to lose my chance to escape from the classroom.

"Fujishima, I saw you at the arcade yesterday. You were with Ichinomiya-senpai, weren't you?"

"Erm, hmm?"

Lately, my classmates kept chatting with me, but I'm still not used to it. To be exact, I haven't remembered their names yet, so I feel as if I did something wrong when I talk to them. But I still answered them:

"Are you talking about Tetsu-senpai, perhaps? Do you guys know him?"

"Of course, Ichinomiya-senpai is extremely famous, I've heard that some boxing centers tried to recruit him for their team."

"That's right, he's a legendary person. Didn't he do a lot of great things before this? I've heard that the reason for which the P.E teacher's restroom was turned into a storeroom is that Ichinomiya-senpai ruined it."

"It was also said that the back door is kept closed because Ichinomiya-senpai broke it, so it's become crooked and couldn't be opened."

“The Principal is bald because of Ichinomiya-senpai.”

Te- Tetsu-senpai is that famous?

“How did you get to know Ichinomiya-senpai, Fujishima?”

That is because……

“Is it because Ichinomiya-senpai always goes to the place where Ayaka is working part time? Isn’t that right?”

The girls joined the conversation too.

“It’s a ramen shop, right? I went there once.” “The shopkeeper’s very pretty.” “Really? I want to go next time.” “Is it tasty?” “Their ice cream is the best.” “Why is it that the ice cream is tasty? Isn’t it a ramen shop?”

But Ayaka as the person that they were talking about did not say anything, or join the conversation. Our classmates ignored Ayaka and I, chatting away happily. Just when we were starting to get rowdy, the bell marking the fifth period rang, and the Chemistry teacher walked into the classroom.

That caused me to be unable to skip the class, and so I was forced to stay until school ends. Usually, Ayaka would immediately drag me to the Gardening Club, but today she just looked at me for a moment, and walked out of the classroom while putting on her armband.

“Did you guys have a fight?”

The guy who sat in front of me asked me casually, and I shook my head. The focus of my classmates were on me. If I were to go home just like that, it seems like the atmosphere would get worse. I was forced to leave my bag in the room and went to look for Ayaka in the courtyard.

Ayaka was holding a spade while squatting at the side of the garden. I sat on the bricks beside the garden, watching the plants that we tended, as I did not know what to say.

The one who spoke first was Ayaka.

“You still don’t remember the names of our classmates, right?”

“…… How did you know?”

“I sensed it from the way that you spoke.”

But is there a problem with that?

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t remember their names, it’s just that you seem very guarded when talking to the others, like you’re talking at two sides of a brick wall. You were like that yesterday too……”

Ayaka still minded what had happened yesterday…… Actually I mind it too. The words that Toshi had said were still lingering in my ears.

“…… Why do you butt in my business so much? Are those people who can’t fit in school life such an eyesore?”

After I said that, I felt that I’ve been too harsh. From yesterday, I had been trying to control my temper. Ayaka looked dumbfounded, with her jaw open. After about three seconds, she suddenly blushed.

“Why are you asking such a thing?”

She actually asked me why.

“I can only speak to the others through a wall, does that bother anyone?”

“…… It bothers me!”

Ayaka answered with her face red.

“…… You’ve bothered me!”

Ayaka’s tone became harsh, and she repeated it again. With my mouth half-open, I could only stare at her lips in a daze. What is she talking about? What does she man by that?

“You don’t need to know the others in class better, but can’t you lower your guard when talking to me? It makes me feel very lonely.”

“…… Why?”

“Why? You asked me why? Don’t you know?”

Ayaka stood up and said loudly. Quite a few students in the courtyard shifted their gaze to us.

“I…… Eh? Ah, wh- why?” My muddled thoughts made me seem as if I’m raving. I stood up.

“…… I really don’t know!”

“Forget it, never mind if you don’t know.”

Ayaka, whose face was dyed a sunset red, bit her lips and shook her head. I froze, and Ayaka took her bag that was on the bench beside the garden, turned around and ran away.

“…… Wait!”

I don’t know why I wanted to catch hold of Ayaka, but she roughly flung away my hand.

Bzzzzzzt.

The sound of something tearing rang out loud. My whole body suddenly became cold.

A yellow object fell onto the soil.

The armband of the Gardening Committee have become a torn, yellow piece of cloth.

“Ah……”

Ayaka turned around, used her hands to cover her mouth, and lowered her head to look at the armband for awhile. When I picked it up to say something, Ayaka hurriedly turned around and ran

away, disappearing out of the school gate in a flash.

I was left behind. I squatted down and went into a daze in the winter sun, thinking repeatedly about the things that Ayaka have just said. I thought for many times, but I still couldn't understand the reason for Ayaka's tears, and have no idea what to do now.

I stood there for awhile, and resignedly picked up the spade and the armband. I originally thought that Ayaka might come back immediately, but I as a member of the Gardening Club should still do my job. But I only know how to water and weed, after I finished doing them, it was as if there was a hole in my heart.

Until the sun had set, Ayaka still hasn't come back.

I walked into the computer lab that I didn't enter for a long time, tried to sit in the seat by the windows, but I couldn't find the energy to turn on the computer. So the computer lab that has only one person is actually so quiet.

I placed the torn armband on the table. Why? Why did Ayaka get angry? I got more and more angry thinking about it. She didn't even explain properly but started to cry, it gave me a headache too. I don't even know if it's my fault. No, it is probably my fault. If I cannot continue to be silent, what should I do?

Then I thought of something.

Doesn't this mean that I've returned to the days when I'm alone?

But the silence in the room was suffocating. I couldn't stand it, stuffed the armband back into my pocket and walked out of the computer laboratory.

*

When I think about it, it's the first time that I went to the station by myself. Around the station were a lot of people waiting to cross the road, sometimes the crowd rushed out as if a gate suddenly opened.

On the road, there was an orchestra of the sound of exhausts,

footsteps of hundreds of people, people selling phones and music of Christmas songs. Walking in the crowd, my back and my shoulders kept getting pushed, so I could only continue to walk unsteadily. Suddenly I had an illusion that I was alone at a barren place in the winter.

I shook my head, crossed the zebra crossings and went to the arcade at the street center.

I remember using a few coins to play, but didn't really remember what game I've played. After I used up all the coins, I sat on the chair with my back to the wall and stared at the end screen of the game.

Before I met Ayaka, how did I pass my time alone? I actually could not remember it, it's really unbelievable. I don't know how to apologize to Ayaka if I went to the ramen shop and met her there, so I could only stay in the arcade, depressed. Because Ayaka doesn't even want to speak to me.

That was how I tiredly leaned against the wall, and did not leave until the arcade played the 'Goodnight Song'.

*

It was already past midnight, the streets that were further away from the station were already in darkness. I walked near Hanamaru Ramen shop and peered inside the shop from between the buildings. The curtains were already taken down, and a dim light could be seen faintly in the dark kitchen. There weren't anyone else except Min-san, as it was already time for the shop to close.

What am I doing?

I squatted beside the air-conditioner to hide myself. Everything has already become messed up. I really feel like digging a hole to hide in it. When I sat down, the cold air passed through my thin coat. Maybe I should just sleep here? I might be able to freeze to death like this.

“Narumi, what are you doing here?”

Suddenly I heard a voice from above me. Shocked, I stood up and banged my head on the exhaust pipe. The pain made me see stars.

“…… It hurts.”

“Are you an idiot……”

A surprised expression appeared on Min-san’s face.

“How……” How did you know that I was here?

“Alice called me to say that someone was loitering over here. Why did you come? Ayaka has already gone home!”

“Ah……”

It’s the surveillance cameras. How annoying, wasting these high-tech machines on this useless place. I could not face Min-san, but felt her gaze on me.

I couldn’t say anything for a moment.

Finally, I heard her sigh.

“Do you want to enter the shop? There are some new dishes for the winter.”

I raised my head. Min-san has even took off her vest, wearing an apron on the lower half of her body, while only a sarashi was bound to the upper part of her body.

Min-san took hold of my arms and dragged me into the shop. I just came here yesterday, but now I still feel that the smell in Hanamaru Ramen Shop is very nostalgic. The large pot that was used to cook soup in the kitchen was still being heated up, with white fumes wafting out of it. Even if it’s winter, the soup that is prepared for a long time would still be steaming hot, wouldn’t it? It’s just that the way that Min-san was dressed: showing her stomach, was too hot for a teenager like me. I could only look away from her.

Min-san took two paper cups and sat down beside me. Hello? You're just wearing a sarashi for your upper body! Why don't you at least wear a shirt? I tried very hard not to look at her and focused my attention on the ice cream. The ice cream this time was sprinkled with cocoa powder. Eating just a spoonful of it, I could taste the sweet flavor of cheese and the fragrance of orange wine, this is a flavor that even I know.

"…… Tiramisu?"

“That’s right, sometimes I would try to make something mainstream too. Does it taste good?”

I nodded. Compared to the ramen here, saying that the ice cream is good isn’t really just being courteous. I remember that tiramisu in Italian meant ‘give me a pull’, is my depressed feeling that clearly shown on my face? I fell into deep thought, and accidentally let my tongue slip.

“You can make such delicious ice cream, then why did you open a ramen shop?”

Whoops!

I cautiously took a peek at Min-san’s expression, but could only see a melancholic expression on her face.

“This shop was originally my dad’s.” Her expression suddenly returned to normal and said: “I have wanted to open an ice cream shop, so I became an apprentice at an ice cream shop. But one day my dad suddenly disappeared without a trace, so I came back to inherit the shop.

“So that’s it……” I don’t know what to say, and could only lower my head in apology. “I’m sorry, asking these strange questions.”

“You don’t need to be sorry.” Min-san said while smiling.

“Haven’t you ever thought of remodeling the shop into an ice cream shop?”

“Yeah, I did. But I like this shop, the customers and the atmosphere here. These are only present because of the ramen shop. If I remodeled the shop, these will disappear, so I chose to continue.”

Min-san looked around the dark shop. There were menus that were splattered with drops of oil, autographs of artists(probably) stuck onto the wall, a cracked counter, and an old but brightly polished kitchen ceiling and wall.

“Those who doesn’t have a job claimed the back of the ramen shop as their territory, it’s because they don’t have any other places to

go. I don't mind that!"

While saying that, Min-san patted her apron that had 'Hanamaru' printed on it. This is the symbol of the shop and the shop is what Min-san got for giving up on her dream of selling ice cream.

"Is…… that so?"

I again thought of meaningless stuff, and accidentally blurted out.

"But your father might be missing because he hated the ramen shop and may not have wanted you to inherit the ramen shop."

"I know."

Min-san slapped my shoulders roughly while laughing loudly.

"I don't care what other people think of, I just do it because I feel like doing it, and that's enough. People live by forcing others to accept other people to accept their own way of living."

I blankly stared at Min-san's face.

"We don't even know what they're thinking about anyways, so we can only assume that they are the same as us!"

…… Ah, so that's how it is.

I finally understood the reason for Ayaka's anger.

She was the same as me. I , too, was depressed and angry because Ayaka went away without saying a thing.

Because the only person by my side was Ayaka.

Ayaka was the only person who talked to me.

Why did I find out about such a simple matter only now? Why now?

After a long silence, I suddenly found that my forehead was on Min-san's bare shoulders, then I hastily backed away.

“Ah, err…… So- sorry.”

Min-san laughed, patted my head gently and showed a ‘it’s all right, don’t you mind’ kind of smile.

Things are probably alright now, right? Although I still don’t know what to do. Probably because I was now relieved, my stomach started to grumble. Min-san did not miss that.

“There’s a ramen with a new flavor, do you want to try it?”

“Err….. Erm…..” I hesitated for awhile. It seemed that Min-san has noticed something, then she squinted while coming close to me.

“……Hmmm, I feel that you often tell people of your true feelings, so I have something to ask you.”

“Ah?” Do I look like this kind of person? Do I talk to myself so frequently?

“…… How is my ramen? Are they good?”

Min-san’s expression became very sincere. Her hands held both of my hands, wet eyes looking at me coquettishly, making me unable to keep silent.

“Err……”

“You can just tell me the truth, I won’t hit you.”

“Sometimes the soup just feels a tiny bit sweet……”

“You can just tell me honestly, is it good or is it bad?”

“If you really want me to say, then of course it’s bad. Ouch! That hurts, didn’t you say you won’t hit me?”

“Shut up, idiot!”

I was kicked out of the shop.

“I WILL make a soup that will make you say that it is tasty and touch you to tears, remember that!”

Like a child screaming at me, Min-san closed the grille door. I was the only person at the bottom of this building.

Will things turn out alright even now? How should I apologize? ‘It’s simple…..” Ayaka’s words replayed in my mind. ‘Shout when you’re angry like the others, and laugh when you’re happy like the others, speak your mind when you want something, you could do it too.’

If things were that simple, I wouldn’t be here right now. Then what on Earth could I do? I thought fuzzily while walking towards the cold, night streets.

*

I skipped classes for two days. It was not because I was sick or hurt. Although I, myself, thought that this is stupid, I still felt: I can’t face Ayaka before I’m mentally prepared.

On Friday, I went to school after it had ended. I haven’t gone to the rooftop after school for quite some time now, but Ayaka was nowhere to be seen. Crossing over the railings and looking at the campus, I could not see Ayaka at the garden.

I thought—— maybe it’s already too late, maybe I have already lost everything, but is still comically turning around in circles, trying to make amends. That couldn’t be helped, because I’m an idiot.

After pondering for a while, I thought of a place that I haven’t searched for yet.

The greenhouse was at the interior of the school, near to the walls surrounding the school. At the other side of the wall is a graveyard, so not many people go there. Entering the Gardening Club for a month or so, this is still the first time that I’ve come to the greenhouse. As taking care of greenhouse plants requires special skills, Ayaka has always handled them alone.

Through the foggy glass, I could only faintly see the greenery inside, its interior should be about as big as a classroom.

When I was about to extend my hands to the high class rustless handle, the door opened from the inside.

"…… Fujishima-kun?"

Suddenly I came face to face with Ayaka, who looked shocked after giving out a scream. I was shocked too, and could not immediately accept the fact that Ayaka suddenly appeared before my eyes.

"I- I just sprayed some herbicide inside, so you can't go close to it!"

Ayaka regained her cool and pushed me out of the greenhouse by the chest.

"Why did you come here?"

Ayaka sounded as if she was still angry.

"…… Well, I'm also a part of the Gardening Club."

"You don't need to force yourself again. It's all my fault, dragging you into the Gardening Club against your will. Let's just be a ghost member in each other's clubs."

Ayaka said angrily, which was out of character for her.

"……That wouldn't do."

I said with a voice that got smaller and smaller. Maybe Ayaka would never forgive me ever again. Thinking of this, my whole body shivered.

"Why? Aren't you……."

"…… If things go on like this, won't the things that we've painstakingly done go to waste?"

"—— Eh?"

I took out a plastic bag from my pocket, took out one of them and stuffed it into her hands. She opened her hands and raised it to eye level. It was a piece of black cloth —— an armband, and on it was

printed a round, orange shape.

Ayaka stared at the armband for a while, and raised her head.

“…… Pervert, Repelling, Machine? (Note: Pervert, repel, and machine in Japanese are ‘Chikan’, ‘Genkitai’, and ‘Machine’ respectively. Their initials CGM are the same as the badge.)”

“I think it’s better if you return that to me!”

“Whoa, I’m just joking, sorry.”

“You read it from the middle letter —— M High School Gardening Club.

“…… It means us, right?”

I shifted my gaze and nodded. The expression on Ayaka's face went through complicated changes, looking as if she was both crying and laughing.

"How did you make this? It wouldn't be because you wanted to make this that you took two days off, would it?"

"Yeah, I designed it using a computer, and made it at a shop."

Ayaka looked relieved. She carefully wore the armband and then showed it to me; her stiff expression was gradually gone too.

Ayaka looked at the plastic bag in my bag and said: “Did you make one for yourself, too?”

“Yeah, you need to order at least ten if you want to make it there.”

I thought up a lot of things as an apology, but my mind was blank right now.

“I never thought that you were that bad at negotiating with other people.”

Ayaka laughed delightedly, while I was completely embarrassed, and could only lower my head.

“But you made the armband for me, I’m really happy.”

She said to me. I raised my head, clumsily returned her smile and said with my voice that sounded like it was going to vanish at any moment: “Uh, I’m sorry……” That was the best that I could do at that moment.

“Hey, let’s make a bigger one! Like a flag or something. We can use it during the school festival for the club relay race.”

Who would take part, then? There’s only two people in the club.

“That’s right, we can make a webpage! We can let this logo take the stage on the website. Do you know how to do these things?”

What can you put on the website? But I did not have enough time to answer before Ayaka continued: “Then I’ll go borrow the keys to the rooftop!” and then ran away.

While looking at her silhouette, I thought to myself: it’s okay if things are like this.

I might be clumsy, but, it would be enough if I do the things that I know how to do bit by bit.

*

But all of this is too late. At a place that I do not know of, my small world is quietly but truly corroded by drugs. At the corner of the evening paper that night, there was a report of the death of a young man who was sent to the hospital because of overdose of medication.

The ‘Angel Fix’ incident made a mess of my sixteen year old life in that winter, and the first person who died in that incident was that person.

Chapter 3

During the winter break, I started to show up at Hanamaru Ramen Shop more often, because Ayaka was usually working there. Just staying at home is really boring, anyways.

At first, Ayaka was surprised every time she saw me.

“So you can go out even when you have nothing to do?”

What kind of person does she think I am?

Hanamaru Ramen Shop was always very free in the winter, there weren’t much customers in the morning. One reason is because it’s the new year period. On the other hand, it’s because there is a chance that the ramen shop is mistaken to be an ice cream shop.

That day, Hiro, Ayaka and I were tasting Min-san’s special hemp ice cream. As I had been tasting only salty ramen the whole day, my tongue felt much better when it came in contact with the sweet taste of the hemp and vanilla ice cream. The soup that Min-san makes is now much better than what she made before, but tasting them every day is still very painful.

“Did Toshi contact you after that?”

Facing Hiro’s inquiries, Ayaka bit her spoon, knitted her brows and shook her head.

“He didn’t even come home for the new year.”

Does Ayaka know that Toshi was addicted to drugs? From last year's end until this year, quite a few cases of violence occurred in the streets. I heard that the police couldn’t make head or tails of what the suspects said, as the drug addicts' addiction of the drug made them suffer when they were in custody. I watch the news every morning and night, and the name Shinozaki Toshi could be seen on the television screen each time, as he is missing right now.

Ayaka said: “ I think my brother is probably at Hakamizaka’s place.”

“Is that person Toshi’s girlfriend?”

“No, he’s a guy! I’m not sure, but I think he’s a university student or a researcher.”

It’s impossible for brother to have a girlfriend! Ayaka said seriously, which was out of character. Although it was pitiful for Toshi to be said that he could not have a girlfriend, but actually I have the same sentiments. Only Hiro gave a contrasting opinion.

“Really? His weak personality is actually quite suited for being a gigolo. I won’t be surprised even if he’s staying at some girl’s place right now. Actually, I’m more relieved if that's the case.”

“No doubt that it’ll be more reassuring if things are so…… But it’s impossible! Brother can’t wash his clothes and can’t cook.”

“Nonono, a gigolo doesn’t need to wash clothes or cook.”

“Is that so?”

“Although they’re sometimes misunderstood, the ones that could do housework are ‘househusbands’, not gigolos. Gigolos want women to feel: ‘This guy can’t live on without me!’ so the housework is handled by the women.”

This guy is completely useless.

“Wow, I can’t do it if it were me. I would probably feel embarrassed for that and give them a hand, finish the cooking and wait for them to come back or something like that.”

“That’s right, the job of a gigolo is to bring out the motherly instinct in a woman, a normal person isn’t competent enough to do all that.”

“That’s so wonderful of you!”

It’s not wonderful at all, what nonsense is Hiro spouting? He’s an

incomparably useless scum! Although I was thinking that to myself, I was lazy to correct them, so I continued to eat my hemp ice cream.

“Have you ever thought about marriage?”

“Never!”

“Why is that?”

“Actually I have a person that I truly love in my heart, so I can’t marry other women.”

“But then is it okay for you to live together with them? Don’t you feel that you’re doing something wrong on the girls?”

“I feel that I’m wronging them as well, but I couldn’t change it, this is my lifestyle.”

“Go to hell!”

“That won’t do, Fujishima-kun, you spoke out the things that you are thinking about again.”

Ah, it’s true, but never mind.

“Did you guys just mention Hakamizaka?”

A voice came from behind us. I turned over my head, and saw a person wearing a square, fur hat like those worn by the Alaskan soldiers, and a plump waterproof outer coat used in the army. I only recognized after a while that that person was Major. The goggles-styled sunglasses completely covered up his eyes, making them seem as if they’re a part of his face.

“Ah! Mukai-san, it’s been a while, happy new year! What would you like to order today?”

“I’m on duty right now.”

“What about the Chinese Garlic set?”

“Hmmm…… Okay then!”

Why did Major order something so obediently? And also, what is the Chinese Garlic set?

It was like Major couldn’t handle Ayaka. Among the people that I know, only Ayaka calls Major by his name. Every time when I hear it, I thought to myself: Who is Mukai-san?

“Finally there’s some work to do! Min-san, one Chinese naengmyeon(Note: a type of noodles), with added garlic!”

Ayaka stood up and rushed into the kitchen. Eating naengmyeon in this cold weather? Major looked as if he has just swallowed a live toad, and sat down on the gas tank that Ayaka was sitting on just now.

Hiro asked Major: “Major, did you know the person called Haka-something?”

“I think there’s a person called Hakamizaka at the research centre of our school.”

Hiro and I were taken aback and looked at each other. Hiro leaned forward and continued:

“We’ve heard that Hakamizaka is the person who’s hanging out with Toshi lately.”

Major pressed his hand against his chin and thought for a while.

“Do you know him? Then try to make some inquiries!”

“No, I’ve just heard about his name. He’s really famous! They say that he doesn’t even show up at the research centre, but his PhD thesis went through. But they might just have the same name, right? Why would Toshi hang out with this kind of people?”

“Haka-something isn’t a name that every Tom, Dick and Harry has! Toshi didn’t contact us much lately.”

“But I’ve just went to the school once today, do you want me to go

again? There's professors and students everywhere!"

Of course there's professors and students in a university! But Major is actually a university student! This point really surprised me.

"The professors just nag me to death whenever I show up."

"Then just leave school earlier!"

"What are you talking about? For the sake of barely staying in school, I strive to get credits that are barely enough to pass, and then skip classes, maintaining the state of not going to the next level or graduating, waiting for eight years to pass then leave school automatically."

"…… Don't you want to graduate?" I actually asked him that.

"Am I still considered a NEET if I graduate normally from university? Don't you know what the second E in NEET means?" Seeing you screaming blue murder about things like this, I'm having a headache too.

"Major goes to university for the sake of searching for information."

"That's because history books and military information is not cheap! Letting the school library buy it is the best plan. I just ask the library to buy books for me before I leave school, until the whole room is filled with the books that I want to read, and then the room would be called the Major room."

Just buy it yourself if you want to read it! What a troublesome student.

"That's right, let me tell you, the books that are in this time are about battle submarines that can emit signals!"

"Oh yeah, Major, didn't you go to school because of Alice's request?"

Major opened the bag and turned it upside down, and the papers inside fell out onto the crate that we used as a table.

“You guys want to see the photocopied information, huh? You’re holding that upside down.”

“I don’t understand this.”

“I, myself, don’t understand it as well.”

I went over to look at the papers that Hiro was holding, the color photocopied paper had a tall, red flower on it, and words were closely packed around the plant.

“You know that drugs are running rampant in the streets right now, right? This is what Yondaime requested Alice to investigate. I’ve heard that it isn’t anything good. Toshi wouldn’t be taking these, would he……”

I was taken aback, and thought of the pink pills that were used to block the twinkling lights of the Christmas decorations, which had wings of angels and two English letters on it. After taking the pills, he claimed that it was a legal medication that could make things ‘look as if they’re not moving’. What was its name again? What was it called? It was at the tip of my tongue, but I still couldn’t remember it.

“Ah, that is……”

“Mukai-san, sorry for the wait.”

Ayaka served Major his naengmyeon, interrupting my words. I swallowed back what I was about to say, because I didn’t want Ayaka to hear it. Hiro showed a confused expression and tilted his head. I hastily shook my head.

“What is it?” Ayaka came over to look, and I speedily snatched the paper from Hiro’s hands and turned it over.

“That’s so bad of you! What are you hiding, Fujishima-kun?”

“Nothing! Nothing at all.”

At this moment, a customer finally appeared in the shop. Ayaka hurriedly put on her apron and went to serve him, allowing me to

heave a sigh of relief.

“What is it? What’s with you, Narumi?”

Just as I was about to answer, the blaring ringtone of ‘COLORADOBULLDOG’ rang in the shop. Major’s skinny body jumped almost a meter high, while Hiro hurriedly took out his phone, but Major was faster.

“I know that you’re here, so don’t talk rubbish with the others downstairs. Hurry up and get here! It’s urgent! And Hiro, hurry up and dive the car to the front, quick!”

Even I could hear Alice’s voice at the other side of the phone clearly, showing how painful Major’s ears are right now. As Major was about to answer her, she hung up.

“Alice is also in a bad mood today, huh?” Hiro raised his head and looked at the worn-out building behind him.

“Don’t you know? Every twenty nine days, Alice would get into a mentally unstable state for five days, this is the result of my detailed investigation so it can’t be wrong. As for the reason, I’m still not sure of that.”

Isn’t the reason obviously because of the girls’ period? But seeing Major triumphantly speaking of all that to Hiro, I couldn’t tell that to them.

“Every twenty nine days, so today is the second day.”

“I’ll go drive the car over here. What would be the matter, I wonder?”

Hiro left, leaving a silent Major. I tilted my head. Alice isn’t that scary, is she? She seemed like she’s in a bad mood everyday, anyways! After I said that, and was fiercely glared at by Major, whose eyes were hidden beneath the goggles.

Finally, Major said seriously:

“Do you know vice-admiral Jisaburo Ozawa? He’s the last

Commander in Chief of Combined Fleet of the Japanese Navies."

"Never heard of him."

"Then don't you know about the naval battle that occurred during the Second World War at Leyte Gulf, Phillipines? It is considered to be the largest naval battle in the world, and Vice-Admiral Ozawa used his team as bait to lure the enemy away , and successfully shifted the attention of the American forces away from Leyte."

"Ah?"

"So we're counting on you, Vice-Admiral Fujishima." Who's the vice-admiral? "Let's meet at the Yakusuni Shrine!"

"Refused!"

*

In the end, I went with Major. As soon as I stepped into Alice's room, I saw her curled in her blanket, looking as though she was going to cry.

"Mocha Bear's ear has fallen off!"

A huge, tea-colored teddy bear was placed at the front of the bed. No matter how you look at it, it was larger than Alice, but that might be because she's too petite. As Alice said, the thread holding together the bear's right ear has burst, exposing the cotton that was hidden in the seams.

"Careful! Carefully place it into the box! Stuff it full of towels! Narumi, don't touch the wound! What if you enlarge the wound!"

Following Alice's directions that were full of yelling and crying, Major and I placed the hurt plushie into a big cardboard box stuffed full of rolled up towels in the seams of the box. The huge, wrapped up box is indeed a thing that couldn't be handled by just a person.

Major asked: "So it'll be okay if we just bring this to Yondaime's?"

“Tell him to fix it by tonight, this concerns my life!”

Alice said with tears in her eyes. Why would they hand it to Yondaime? How does this concern her life? Questions swirled around in my mind, but the atmosphere does not allow me to ask them.

“And here’s the information that you asked me to find.”

Alice took the transparent file from Major, read it as fast as if she’s reading manga, then extracted a portion of the photocopied papers and threw it at me.

“What are you spacing out for? Don’t you know what to do with this if I didn’t tell you to hand this to Yondaime as well?”

Major and I fled the room with the box containing Alice’s precious bear.

*

Hiro’s car was a dark blue, high classed imported car, and doesn’t seem to be something that could be owned by a nineteen year old guy.

“It’s because I’m the only one that has a car, although I didn’t buy it myself.”

He explained that it was a gift from his girlfriend, and it was from his ex-ex-ex-girlfriend. This guy would probably get a knife in his chest by a woman one day.

“But driving there is a suicidal action……” I looked at the other side of the railway, which had grand lights lighting up the night skies. There were three roads at the south side of the station, and there were always traffic jams there.

“Speaking of which, just bringing this box over there with this car also counts as a suicidal action, doesn’t it?”

I lowered my head and looked at the large box containing the

plushie. Hiro had a point. Actually, we could just tie the box at the back of a motorbike and send it there, but Major said that he needed to go back to his school for awhile, and rode the motorbike away. It seemed like he wanted to investigate this Hakamizaka guy.

We stuffed the box into the backseat, used the safety belt to keep it still and went back to the front seat.

“Is that bear really that important?”

“Alice can’t sleep without it at night.”

“Ah?” Things got that bad, just because of that? “But why are we taking it to Yondaime?”

“Ah— about Yondaime, he looks fierce and all, but he has an interest in arts and crafts. He helped Alice to fix the plushie once before, and his skill is top notch. That was also the first time for me to see Yondaime sewing.”

“Who……”

The car soundlessly drove on the streets. The night view has become a river formed by streetlights.

“Who on Earth is that guy?”

“Have you ever heard of the Hirasaka-gumi?"

I do have a faint impression of the name, as it would come up between conversations in school.

“Are they a motorcycle gang?”

“Nono, they’re not a motorcycle gang. They’re just a gang formed from a bunch of kids who likes to fight or to follow the crowd in this district, a self-proclaimed yakuza gang. Yondaime is their leader.”

Hiro said in a casual manner. But even I, who just moved here, know of the existence of the Hirasaka-gumi, so shouldn’t they be quite a large organization?

“Is it because Yondaime is the forth generation of the organization that he is called Yondaime?”

“No, he’s the first leader of the Hirasaka-gumi. He founded Hirasaka-gumi, and so the only person who could control their members is him.”

“Eh? Then why is he called Yondaime?”

“Because he is the forth generation in his hometown, Kansai. It seemed that he ran away from home, and that place is where the true yakuza truly lies."

Whoa, really? Then why didn’t he just stay home and be their forth generation leader?

“He’ll get angry whenever someone calls him Yondaime, but Alice felt amused about that so she deliberately called him Yondaime. That ended up being his nickname between us.”

“You guys really went too far……”

I muttered to myself, and Hiro laughed while patting at the gear he was holding.

“He’s even worse than us! But nobody can beat her, no matter it is Yondaime or us, understand?”

I thought of the snow white skin that was like a Japanese doll, large eyes and long hair as black as molasses. I get what Hiro meant, as I couldn’t win against her.

“But you should refrain from mentioning this to other people, because Yondaime will kill you. Hirasaka-gumi is a self-proclaimed chivalrous organization, and are very adamant, so they won’t forgive those who misuse drugs.”

I remembered something.

“Hiro, do you remember what the drug is called?”

“Nope…… Ah, I’ve forgotten, it should be written on the

information gathered by Major, shouldn't it?"

I skimmed through the papers that we were supposed to give to Yondaime. The rather complicated chemical equations and content written in professional terms made my head spin. Repeating the same action, excitement, overly-alert, insomnia, rising blood pressure, sharp ears, slack pupils…… The side-effects of the drug were densely packed on the paper, telling people how dangerous it is to consume it, the name of the drug, which was the most important to me, was not written on it.

I hope that it's just my groundless fears.

*

The office of Hirasaka-gumi was situated at a somewhat dirty building, after driving on the slope that was at the left side of the main street in front of the station. The building was just beside the fork on the slope.

We parked the car at the parking lot and took out the box. We went on the cramped elevator that was making a noise like the painful panting of old men, up till the forth floor. As soon as we walked out of the elevator, we could see the long, straight signboard hung beside the metal door, and the words 'Hirasaka-gumi" was solemnly written on it. A swallowtail butterfly-shaped logo of the gang was drawn in a round, black frame…… Wait, it shouldn't be the logo of their gang, but the emblem of their organization. I was really freaked out, they aren't really yakuzas, are they? But without even using the doorbell, Hiro straightaway opened the door and went in.

The door in the room was somewhat smaller than the doors in a classroom, and looked even smaller because of the cupboards arranged by the wall, the sofa at the center of the room and the tables. Four or five guys wearing black T-shirts were originally sitting down, but suddenly stood up at the same time.

"Second brother(Note: not sure about this), thanks for your hard work!"

“Thanks for your hard work!”

They saluted Hiro. I couldn’t help but take a step back, nearly dropping the box in the process. What is with this situation? Second brother?

The people wearing black T-shirts were quite young, at most they’re at the age when they’ve just graduated from high school. They had skin that was dyed into a dark color, bleached hair and had piercings in their ears. They looked just like ordinary young people who would gather at the streets of the street center every night. The only thing different with them is that there was an emblem printed on top of their T-shirts.

Hiro answered: “ Don’t call me that! I’ve said that loads of times, don’t call me second brother.”

“But you and Sou-san are just like brothers. Here, let me help you to take your stuff.”

While saying that, Yondaime’s bodyguard – Rocky placed the box onto the ground.

“Well, forget about it, I’ve dated quite a lot of girls before, so in some way, I’m a brother to Yondaime.” How does that count as being his brother?

“Hiro, you really don't want to live anymore, do you?”

Yondaime opened the door to the right and walked out. That day, he was wearing a purple vest, and you can see a tattoo of their emblem on his right shoulder.

“Aren’t you here to hand me an investigation report? What’s with this large box? It isn’t stuffed full of reports, is it?” Yondaime sat down on the chair behind the table and said lazily. Hiro shook his head and tore away the tape on the box.

“Nono, this is Alice’s request. Her doll’s ear dropped off and she wanted someone to fix it.”

Hearing Hiro’s words, Yondaime almost jumped up a few feet, just

like a spring. He jumped over the table and leaped in front of me in a flash, pressed down the box that was about to be opened, and glared ferociously at Hiro.

“Don’t you know that? You can’t speak of that thing here!”

“Sou-san, what’s in the box?”

“Nothing! Carry the box to my car, and don’t look inside. If you look, I’ll beat you up until you forget about it!”

Yondaime’s imposing manner was just like a hurricane, and he threw the car keys to another man. “Yes, sir! I’ll go hone my manliness right away!” He picked up the keys and saluted. How could you even hone your manliness while moving a cardboard box anyway?

“This is ane-san’s stuff, so we should move it carefully.”

Ane-san would be Alice, right? Did they watch too many strange movies or something? The box was taken out by two guys wearing black T-shirts. Did we just do some meaningless labor? I raised my head and looked at Hiro. He was laughing sneakily. Oh～ So he deliberately moved it here to annoy Yondaime…… He told me not to tell anyone, but he himself wanted to tease Yondaime.

“You’ll have to fix it by tonight.”

“I know! I’ll send it there after I fix it.”

Anyhow, he’s still a yakuza boss, but he would actually spend the night fixing a doll for a pajamas-clad hikkikomori? It’s such a mystery, what the heck is with this situation? I looked at the people in the room, thinking that they would probably be very surprised if they know that, huh?

“Do you know it too? Hiro told you about that, didn’t he?”

Yondaime grabbed my shirt by the collar.

“Know what?”

“Know that thing! That!” At this moment, I suddenly felt like teasing him.

“Eh? Which matter do you mean by that?” “Don’t you know it? It’s my…… that!” “You keep mentioning that, but how would I know what’s that when you don’t say it clearly?” “Don’t play the fool! Idiot, how could I possibly say it out myself!” “Eh? But I’m not sure, so why don’t you just tell me the possible answers?” “Narumi, I know that you’re very amused right now, but Yondaime would be very distressed if you don’t stop talking!” “I’ll be the one distressed if I stop talking!” “Here’s the investigation report.”

Hiro handed Yondaime the transparent file, as though nothing happened just now. Yondaime tossed me to the floor and snatched the folder. “Hey! Get me the folder from the hospital.” Yondaime commanded. A man wearing a black T-shirt walked into the room and handed us a sea blue folder.

Returning to the other side of the table, Yondaime looked at the two folders with a serious expression on his face. Hiro went closer to have a look and asked:

“What’s this?”

“It’s the symptoms for the people who were hospitalized this month or so for taking drugs, we’re investigating that as well.”

“That’s quite patient of you…… Oh yeah, you could just compare it with Alice’s information.”

“Right…… Hmm, this guy is……” Yondaime’s finger moved along the information of the drug effects, and then pointed at the papers in the sea blue folder. “…… We guessed correctly. The effects of the drug is too long to be MDMA, while stimulants can’t be taken directly, and the patient is young too.”

“Is it Fix?”

Rocky the bodyguard asked while peeking at the side.

“We won’t know if we don’t ask. He’s at N Hospital, so let’s go!”

Yondaime's words caused all of the black-shirts to stand up and put on jackets. It felt as though the atmosphere in the room changed completely like a light was suddenly turned on.

…… Fix?

The memory of that moment finally surfaced, the carving of the letters A.F at the bottom of an angel's wings. Toshi have said that, angels would not have preferential treatment on humans.

"…… Angel Fix?"

Because of my mutterings, Yondaime fiercely turned around, scaring me until I couldn't even straighten my back.

"Why do you know of Angel Fix?"

"Eh….. That, that's because……"

Yondaime took hold of my collar, and Hiro answered for me with his face green:

"That day I was with Toshi…… That guy……"

"Hey, so the things that Toshi was holding on to were pills? Round ones, you sure?"

Yondaime tightly held my collar, and pulled it until it almost couldn't rise up higher. Being caught, I nodded fervently. Hiro took hold of Yondaime's hand, trying to pull him away from me.

"Stop that! Do you want to kill him? What's with the pills?"

Yondaime tossed me to the sofa, and I could only cough violently while keeping a hand on the floor for support. Yondaime's voice sounded from above me.

"Didn't Alice tell you anything? The way of selling Angel Fix was very special, and didn't have any fixed way of selling them. The people who bought them crushed them into powder, and then sold them to other people that they know. It was like they didn't even want to earn money, so we couldn't find the source of the drug. The

only thing that we are sure of is, the source of the drug is a person with the round pills."

Yondaime stopped talking for a moment and looked at me.

"Is Toshi the person who directly bought the pills, or is he the person who's selling them?"

Putting on the white coat that his lackeys handed him, Yondaime swiftly sent orders using a phone. Some of them went to the hospital while some of them went to search for Toshi. Yondaime and some of his lackeys stayed at the office while the others hastily walked out of it.

"Just go home, Narumi!"

Hiro pulled at the collar of my sports jacket, and only then did I woke up from my stupor.

"You guys aren't looking for….. Toshi, are you?"

"I don't even know where he is."

"But……"

If I have noticed earlier……

"What are you dawdling there for? Hurry up and go home, don't get in our way."

Yondaime's tone was harsh, so Hiro could only drag me out by the arms, but my legs didn't move. Shouldn't there be something that I can help with? Although I'm not really clear about Toshi's problem, but the person who spoke to him last before he disappeared was me. There should be something that I can help with.

"There's nothing that needs your help. Hurry up and scram. There's already someone dead because of the drug."

Yondaime answered sternly.

"But……"

It's all my fault, if I caught hold of Toshi properly, all of this would be okay. If only I remembered the name of the drug earlier and discussed it with someone……

"Narumi……"

It looked as if Hiro, who was at my back, was going to say something, but was halted by Yondaime's raised hand. I felt like I was going to be bitten to death by him, so I could only shut my mouth and lowered my head. The sound of the lackey's footsteps disappeared from the door. I secretly raised my head again.

Yondaime was originally standing at the other side of the sofa, but his wolfish eyes suddenly appeared again before me. I suffered a heavy punch in the stomach, and could not help but to bend my back, saliva dripping out of my open jaw. Yondaime used the hand that he just punched me with to support me and harshly hurled me back to the sofa.

"If that was a knife, you're already dead. Don't be so cocky, kid. A normal person will only get in our way if they get hurt when taking part in an investigation, so you'd better get lost!"

After Yondaime walked out of the room, I leant against Hiro's shoulders and stood up again.

*

The sun had already set by the time we returned to the ramen shop It was as though we could touch the cold air that was accumulated between the buildings. Only the surroundings of the curtains of 'Hanamaru Ramen Shop', which had streetlights shining on it, had some warmth there. I dumbfounded for a moment while looking at the lights.

Walking to the back door of the kitchen, the silhouette that was sitting on a pile of old tires was Tetsu-senpai, wearing a short-sleeved shirt. Holding a bowl, senpai turned around, and there were only the sounds of him eating ramen in the darkness.

"Where's Hiro?"

“He’s parking his car.”

I sat down on the worn out tires, and stopped talking. Senpai finished the salt flavored ramen together with the soup, then took out a crumpled up pachinko magazine from his back.

Isn’t he going to ask about Toshi? Or did he already know but doesn’t care? Am I the only one who’s like an idiot that thinks that I’m involved in this matter?

“What is it?”

I don’t know if he just noticed my gaze, but Tetsu-senpai shifted his attention from the magazine to me.

“Do you already know about Toshi?”

“Yondaime called just now. Toshi is such an idiot.”

“You guys were…… friends, right?”

“We’re friends now, too, as long as he is willing to come.” Tetsu-senpai laughed after saying that.

Then, aren’t you worried of him?

The smile disappeared from senpai’s face, as though he noticed what I wanted to say.

“That guy didn’t come seek for our help, did he? We don’t even know where he is, so we could only stay out of this matter.”

But, I had this feeling – he might have sunk into a seriously helpless state, and that it’d be best if someone could hear his soundless voice. But at least I couldn’t do it, I couldn’t do anything.

“My eyes exist for the purpose of taking note of the number 7s that lie side by side, while looking for a kid that’s addicted to drugs is Yondaime’s job.”

After saying all that, he sank into his pachinko magazine again.

Was this guy really a boxer……?

I suddenly stood up, and went closer to Tetsu-senpai. Almost at the same moment that he raised his head from his magazine, I threw a punch at senpai's stomach, and uttered a late sound. My fist was blocked by Tetsu-senpai's large left hand.

"What are you doing?"

Tetsu-senpai didn't sound angry at all. I shaked my head and squatted down.

"…… Tetsu-senpai, please teach me boxing."

"Why do you want to learn how to box all for a sudden?"

"No particular reason."

I know that I'm just a feeble kid, but I still feel depressed when I know this fact clearly. It can't be helped, I couldn't do anything in reality.

That's right, I should tell Ayaka about what happened to Toshi. But how should I tell her that? While thinking, I looked for Ayaka from the kitchen to outside the shop, but I couldn't see her anywhere.

"Min-san, where's Ayaka?"

I poked my head into the kitchen backdoor and asked. Min-san answered without getting her eyes off her pot on the flames:

"She went home early just now. She looked like she's very ill, did something happen to her?"

Went home early?

I looked at Tetsu-senpai's face.

"She's not here when I came."

It couldn't be because she already knew about Toshi taking drugs? It's impossible. Then what could be the matter? Or did she eat the

leftover hemp ice cream alone, and then had a stomachache?

I leant my back against the gas tank and squatted down. My mood right now was as though I've walking around the wrong place and then going to a dead end, then repeating the same situation again.

I lowered my head, and the phone in my pocket started to quiver.

"I've heard from Yondaime. But let's not talk about how you forgot about such important information first. Where's Ayaka? I couldn't get to her phone."

Am I imagining things? Alice's voice sounded extremely cold.

"…… It looks like she went home early because she felt ill."

"Went home early, huh? This is bad, she's the only clue for contacting Toshi. The third semester starts tomorrow, right? If you see her in school tomorrow, tell her to call me immediately. Although I don't really think the siblings are in contact……"

At that moment, I recalled the night that Toshi called Ayaka. He said that he was calling from Hakamizaka's phone.

"Why didn't you say so earlier? I've really had enough of your dim-wittedness, I really don't know what to compare your brain to. Comparing to the speed that your brain processes, the speed that stalactites grow at could be considered quicker."

Being cruelly chided, my whole body almost curled into a ball.

"When was that last call? Try to think of an exact time."

"It should be…… Before seven. Why are you asking me about the time?"

"I could find out who they are just by checking the phone log. Since we can't get to Toshi's phone, we would have a breakthrough if we could just find out Hakamizaka's way of contact."

Checking the phone log? But how?

“But Ayaka said that there’s no number displayed.”

“So what? It’s just not displayed on Ayaka’s phone, but there would still be a record at the telecommunication center!”

How can you check such a thing? Isn’t that a crime?

“Aren’t you somewhat looking down on NEET detectives?

Alice hung up.

I stared at my cold phone for awhile. Which reminds me, I think she said that she’s a hacker or something like that. She could investigate my file even with Dr. Pepper in one hand, and humming a song through her nose, right? But shouldn’t it be impossible for her to investigate the records of the telecommunication center?

It’s useless if I worry. The only thing that I could do is to tell Ayaka about Toshi’s problem, at least telling her this is my duty. But how should I say it? Your brother is currently addicted to drugs so don’t go near to him, could I tell her something like this?

I don’t know. I don’t have the confidence to tell her about this.

*

On the day of the opening ceremony, Ayaka didn’t go to school. I was worried that she had a bad flu, but she didn’t answer the phone when I called. It couldn’t be helped. I could only take care of the garden and the plants alone, while ignoring the greenhouse.

Ayaka didn’t go to school the next day too. Looking for her at the ramen shop, she wasn’t there too.

“She doesn’t seem like a person who would be absent for no reason.” Min-san knitted her brows. As she was extremely busy serving and washing the dishes, I gave her a hand in washing up the dishes.

The day when I finally saw Ayaka was the fifth day of the new semester, a Friday. I immediately went to the rooftop after school,

and saw a familiar silhouette. With a black armband on her left arm, Ayaka was watering the plants. I was taken aback when I saw Ayaka, who turned her head over. Obviously nothing changed for her, but she looked like someone else for a moment.

“I’m sorry for being absent without a reason.”

“Did you get flu?”

“Yeah, that’s right. It’s probably just flu.”

She gave me a faint smile, one that even I knew that it was fake.

“It seemed like you did the club activities properly when I’m not here.”

“I’m a club member, after all!”

“Thank you, Fujishima-kun.” Ayaka showed me a transparent smile that made people feel helpless. “But if you would put on the armband, I would be even happier.”

“No, that’s too embarrassing. Hey! Stop that!”

Ayaka took off her own armband and started to attack me, trying to put it on my left hand.

“You must wear it the whole day, that’s an order from the club president.”

Ayaka looked really happy that day. She taught me a lot of things, like how to prune, pick seeds, types of fertilizers and floriography, until I almost couldn’t remember them all. Seeing Ayaka like that, I couldn’t help but have an urge to ask her for a few times: “Did something happen to you?” I originally wanted to tell Ayaka about Toshi, but didn’t do so as I didn’t know how to tell that to her.

Finally, it was already sunset. The clock on the school building opposite to this building said that it was four forty-five. We sat side by side on the railings and looked at the evening sky.

“Do you have any siblings?”

Ayaka asked.

“A sister.”

“Really? How’s your relationship with her?”

“Not really good. Recently I kept going home late, so I kept getting scolded. But sister would always make dinner for me, so its still okay, I guess?”

“Your sister is the only one cooking? What about your parents?”

“My father is only home for about five days in a year, while my mother’s already dead.”

“Ah – sorry.”

“Why is it that whenever I answer that my mom is dead, everyone apologizes to me?” I said. “Why? I’m not even angry. Or is it only normal being angry now?”

“Hmmm…… Hmm?” Ayaka’s eyes wandered. “I don’t think you need to force yourself to get angry.”

“Really? I don’t know what they mean by normal.”

“You don’t need to feel that you have some kind of handicap!”

“That’s because your words made me feel handicapped.”

Ayaka laughed dryly.

“That’s just a lie. As I don’t really know how talk to the others, actually I only wanted to talk to you.”

I felt Ayaka’s gaze on my face, but I couldn’t turn my face over.

“I didn’t go to school when I was in middle school, but just studied at home. After I went to high school, I just feel that…… feel that I should start over. Until about May or so, I passed my time at the rooftop during recess and after school. After that, I tried to chat with the others and avoid coming to the rooftop. But I still felt very

lonely in my heart, and could only feel happy when I'm gardening.

Ayaka raised her head to look at the setting sun.

"One day, I came back to the rooftop because of despair, but I found that you were here."

When did that happen, I wonder? Much earlier than when I noticed Ayaka, she had already knew who I was.

"That time I wanted to look for you and have a talk, but I didn't have a chance. So I moved a few plants to the rooftop and pretended to stay at the rooftop because of club activities."

I almost couldn't breathe at this moment.

"I'm probably clumsier than you. Although you might not feel it, I'm really thankful to you. So, when spring comes –"

Ayaka stopped and gazed at the soil full of weeds.

When spring comes?

What on Earth was the matter? Ayaka's really strange today. Saying all these things that make people feel uncomfortable, something DID happen, right? I must ask her about this.

But as I was about to speak, there was a sound that indicated that someone was opening the door to the rooftop.

A person wearing a pale green coat and unforgettably long hear appeared at the door. It was the consultant teacher for the Gardening Club – Sayuri-sensei (because everyone calls her by her name, I don't know what teacher's surname is) .

"Ah, both of you are here."

Wearing high-heeled shoes, Sayuri-sensei ran unsteadily while waving at us.

"Shinozaki, did you take leave because of flu?"

“I’m okay already.”

Ayaka showed a nervous smile while saying.

“Really? Then that’s great. That’s right, you should clear the plants at the rooftop.”

Ayaka frowned and said: “Is there going to be any activities there?”

“The group photo for the graduation yearbook. I’ve heard that we would assemble at the rooftop, and the photo would be taken from above on a helicopter.”

Sayuri-sensei looked around the rooftop.

“But there’s so much weeds here, we can’t just have you to clearing them.”

As sensei have said, the weeds occupied the whole rooftop just by growing in the cracks in the floor.

She took out a tape measure and started to measure the size of the rooftop. There are about two hundred people or so graduating from our school (it’s actually rare for a school in this district to have so many people graduating). Would the rooftop be enough for that many people?

“That’s right, it’s already the season for graduation. Time really flies.”

After Sayuri-sensei left, Ayaka said in a lonely tone:

“But there’s no problem if Fujishima-kun is here. We’re going to recruit a lot of new members next year!”

Ayaka looked at the black armband on my arm, and I nodded silently.

Until much later, I still remembered what Ayaka said that time – what did that mean?

Does she mean that she’s okay if she’s with me?

Or – does she mean that it okay if it's just me?

"So, Fujishima-kun……"

Ayaka hesitated, staring at my face. That was the first time, and the last time, that Ayaka hesitated when speaking to me. That was obviously an unusual situation, why didn't I notice it? Why?

But Ayaka gave me, who was confused, a smile and shook her head.

"Sorry, there's nothing."

*

The club activities ended for that day. After that, we went to the ramen shop together. Ayaka was harshly scolded by Min-san for being absent without a reason, so she broke a pile of bowls due to being overactive.

When I was trying the abnormally bitter mocha ice cream, Tetsu-senpai, Major and Hiro appeared, which was quite early for them.

Hiro said: "We visited the hospital just now."

"Visited the hospital?"

"One of the kids in Yondaime's organization got stabbed. He found the source of the drug, but that guy had a knife and he started to crave for his drug."

"Then……"

"Anyhow it's fine if he's okay. He was my kouhai, too."

Tetsu-senpai sat on the ladder and sighed.

"Now Hirasaka-gumi is murderously searching in the streets, so if Toshi is also a drug dealer……"

Senpai sneaked a peek at Ayaka who was in the kitchen, lowered his volume and said:

“He’ll probably get caught soon.”

Major told us: “It looks like Hakamizaka really is a researcher from our school.” “Alice is on that trail, so we could probably catch him soon.”

I sneaked a peek at Ayaka too, thinking that I don’t need to force myself to tell her about Toshi seeing as we’ll find him soon. I consoled myself that way, and didn’t want Ayaka to worry on the other hand.

I just hope Toshi coincidentally got the drug from someone, and then was addicted.

“Good. Before Toshi comes back, let’s just teach Narumi first.”

“Let’s start from playing dices!”

Eh? How did things turn up like this?

But I could not refuse as I was surrounded by Tetsu-senpai, Hiro and Major. It was actually the first time that I was force to gamble money in a game of dice. In the end, senpai owed me about two hundred and seventy thousand yen. Senpai who lost all of his money said to me halfway: “Although I don’t have any money left, I’m still going to bet ten thousand!”, or “I can’t pay all that anyway, so I’ll add twenty thousand!” What a ridiculous person.

*

On the way home, I walked to the busstop with Ayaka, but still couldn't say anything. When we walked past the bridge, the bus coincidentally passed by us. Ayaka hurriedly chased the bus, and waved at me.

I could still remember clearly Ayaka's face at that moment.

That was the last time that I saw Ayaka's healthy smile.

*

In the cold air of the Tuesday morning, someone found Ayaka collapsed at the garden in front of the school building. The teachers and students from the sports clubs formed a wall of humans, surrounding the blood that was splattered on the cement ground. Ayaka's upper body was collapsed on her garden that she tended to for ten months. She had a pale, green face and reddish black marks could be seen clearly below her open eyes, making her look like she's in the battle clothes of the natives.

The girls turned their head around and threw up. Although the teachers were desperately shooing away the students, the crowd was still there. I also stood in the wall of humans, faintly hearing the sound of an ambulance getting closer.

I kept staring at Ayaka's small body being moved to a stretcher, until the white car swallowed her up and left. The sound of the ambulance rang again. I rushed to the parking lot for bicycles, opened the lock like I was going to break it, got on my bike and rushed out.

I chased the ambulance that was rushing out to the road, the freezing wind scratched my ears, as if it's going to cut my ear off.

I don't really remember what happened after I reached the hospital. I remember the white walls of the corridors, the lit light on top of the door of the surgery room, stretchers going here and there, and the footsteps of the nurses.

Ayaka was sent directly to the ICU room straight after she went through surger, while I was kicked out of the hospital. A crowd wearing familiar uniforms was gathered at the entrance, even though it was so late.

"Fujishima, how is Ayaka?"

"Have the surgery finished?"

"Hey, is Ayaka okay? Hey!"

Surrounded by my classmates, I could only shake my head while

looking at the floor. The noise was painful to my ears. I pushed away the people and ran away.

At the pitch black bicycle parking lot, my bike was so cold that it was as if it had frozen.

When I went home, I snuggled into my bed, imagining the moment when Ayaka crossed over the railings on the rooftop to jump of the building, but I couldn't. What's with this? What on Earth is with this? My tightly clenched hands started to tremble, and I started feeling nauseous. I fervently tried not to, and in the end I went into the realm when reality and dreams interlaced and slept.

*

The next morning, the television broadcasted the news of a female student suiciding by jumping off the rooftop of M High School. It seemed like they found her shoes arranged tidily by the railings, but didn't find a will. When the screen showed the familiar school entrance and buildings, I rushed into the washroom and threw up, but only gastric acid came out.

"I'll help you call the school for sick leave!"

My sister said to me, who closed myself in my room. It was only at these moments that my emotionless, stern sister with her sharp eyes made me feel a hint of gratitude. Finally, her voice saying "I'm going out" and there were footsteps walking out of the entrance. I'm the only one left in the house.

There's only me left.

I recalled the day on the rooftop. Did I say anything wrong? Was Ayaka trying to say anything to me? Why didn't she say it? Did I miss something? If I asked her, would she answer? Why didn't I ask? Why? My phone rang for quite some time, but I pretended not to hear it. My mind kept replaying the few hours on that day at the rooftop.

The only thing that Ayaka left me was the armband of the Gardening Club, printed with an orange logo on it. It's the armband

that she wore on her arm that day. After I was forced to put it on, I wanted to return it to her, and brought it back home straightaway.

Have Ayaka already planned to suicide at that moment?

I don't get it.

When I suddenly felt like opening the curtains, it was already dark outside. As soon as I turned on the lights, the glass windows reflected the pitiful face of a young man.

That person was me.

With my back on the blue skies of the evening, I squatted down on the mat. It was like my body belonged to another person, as I couldn't even feel a hint of coldness.

*

When I finally saw Ayaka, it was two days after that.

In the room that was colorless but exceptionally bright, Ayaka laid on the mattress. I thought that Ayaka would be surrounded by many types of tubes and unknown machine, making her seem like a scary pincushion; but there's really just an IV hanging on her hand. I only recognized Ayaka's face. Her hair were completely shaved off. Her tightly wrapped head laid on the pillow looked very small in comparison.

I sat on the round stool, looking at the pale eyelids that wouldn't open again. At the other side of the bed, the doctor was explaining to Ayaka's mother about the difference of a person in a vegetative state and brain death.

I thought to myself: What's the difference?

Both could not talk or laugh, so what's the difference?

Why didn't anyone say anything to me, who's present? I don't get it. It's probably because I came here early morning although it was already school time, so I was mistaken as her family? The doctor

then started to explain the payment for euthanasia and life support system, but that might not be a doctor, but a merciless person from the insurance company. You all should just shut up. Why could you say these things in front of Ayaka as if nothing have happened?

Why did this happen on Ayaka?

Anger suddenly surged inside of me.

This is all someone's fault, some person forced Ayaka to an impasse. What did God write in Ayaka's page of His notebook? Although it was a dumb thought, but I couldn't stop it. At a place that I don't know of, even if someone is stabbed, shot, or ran over, I don't care, but not about Ayaka.

I hugged my knees on the hard, round stool of the hospital, restraining the dumb thoughts that exploded in my heart.

After that, my classmates came to visit Ayaka for quite a few times. Compared with seeing Ayaka, they were even more surprised when they saw me. It seemed that they said stuff like cheer up, you can't skip school or something like that, but I couldn't really remember it.

In the end, the only person in the ward was me. Only me and Ayaka's empty shell were left. The winter sunlight that passed through the curtains were slow and weak.

I couldn't take it, so I dragged my stiff body and ran out of the hospital, went home, and closed myself in my room.

*

On the following two or three days, I didn't even go out of my room.

I didn't feel like going to the hospital anymore, as I didn't want to see my classmates, and I felt sad when I saw Ayaka.

My sister knocked on the door and said: " You've skipped school for about a week now, huh?" I silently shook my head. Even though

she couldn't see my expression, she still placed a big bowl of porridge in front of the door and went to work.

I didn't even touch it, and left the porridge to cool. It was not until noon that I opened the window that I didn't open for three days, and breathed in the outside air. My lungs and throat were burning, giving out white fumes so clear that you could even catch it with your hands. The sunny sky was so dazzling that even my eyes started to hurt.

The last moments that I went through with Ayaka on the roof, was also a sunny day like this.

Seeing the fact that I would turn out like this, I felt perplexed too. It was just someone other than me doing suicide, it was just someone other than me who wouldn't smile or open their mouth again, that's all.

The me three months before would probably laugh at me right now, huh? Or -

The doorbell suddenly rang, scaring me into hiding below the windows. At the moment when I froze, the doorbell rang twice, thrice, and then a whole lot more. The sharp sound of the electric doorbell pierced my eardrums. Who was that? Why did they do that? Was that a child playing a prank?

The sounds of the doorbell finally stopped, and the sounds of an exhaust engine started. I peeked at the road outside the windows, and saw a skinny silhouette donning clothes for camouflage driving away a motorbike, and disappeared at the corner.

It was Major.

Why did Major come to my house?

I ran down the stairs and opened the door to the entrance. There was a black box on the doorstep, and familiar words were written on it in white – Hanamaru. With trembling hands, I picked up the box, tore away the tape and opened it.

White fumes rushed out. In the whitish solids – dry ice, there were

two round, transparent plastic cup, and there were ice cream sprinkled with chocolate powder on top on it.

Tiramisu.

‘Give me a pull.’

I moved the box to the kitchen and sat down on the floor. I took out a cup and ate a mouthful of the ice cream. Swallowing food was abnormally hard, I choked on my second mouthful of ice cream. The ice cream that was cold, sweet and painful.

After finishing the two ice creams, I stared at the dry ice in the box until they finished subliming and disappeared. The weight and coldness on my knees finally disappeared after a long, long time.

When I took a bath, I felt that my whole body have been refreshed.

Finally, it was five in the evening. After I dried myself and walked out of the door.

*

I just didn’t go to the ramen shop for a week, but everything seemed to have changed. The shop was full of customers, there were even people holding bowls on the chairs outside and on beer crates. It’s just the usual view of the ramen shop, but Ayaka was not there.

Min-san looked at me, who was standing at the entrance, for a moment. The office workers who were chewing dumplings while reading the sports news were also staring at me.

Min-san said: “You’ve finished the two ice creams?” I nodded.

“Is that so? One of them was for Ayaka.”

Min-san’s words pierced my heart.

I left the bright entrance of the shop and went to the backdoor of the kitchen, but only saw Tetsu-senpai’s silhouette in the darkness.

Senpai was sitting on the second step of the stairs, and was reading a magazine about pachinko machines. I didn't even know what to say, so I could only remain silent, listening to the sounds of people ordering food and the sounds of cutlery colliding.

Tetsu-senpai finally stood up. I was surprised, and hurriedly straightened my back.

"Narumi, you wanted me to teach you boxing, right?"

"….. Eh? Oh, Yeah…… That's right."

"I owe you two hundred thousand, so I'll teach you for free, a two years course."

"Senpai……"

"Stand up, and take off your coat."

Tetsu-senpai's words were hard to oppose. I stood up and took off my coat.

"Why did you want to learn boxing?"

I stared blankly at Tetsu-senpai, then lowered my head and looked at my coarse hands.

"…… It's because I wanted to, become stronger……"

"Hmm, so what's the fastest way to become stronger?"

"Eh? Isn't it practice?"

"No, the correct answer is……"

Tetsu-senpai took out two rolls of bandages out of the bag beside him.

"Put on the bandages."

"Eh?"

"The difference between a boxer and ordinary people is not being

strong or weak, but they couldn't hit other people meaninglessly. When you hit other people, your fists would hurt, and the other party would hurt too. When you think that the other person would hurt too, you couldn't hit them anymore. Put on the bandages."

Tetsu-senpai wrapped up both of my fists firmly with bandages. My clenched fists didn't even feel like it's my own. After that, senpai took out a punching bag and wore it on his hands.

"Come! Punch me! Anywhere is okay."

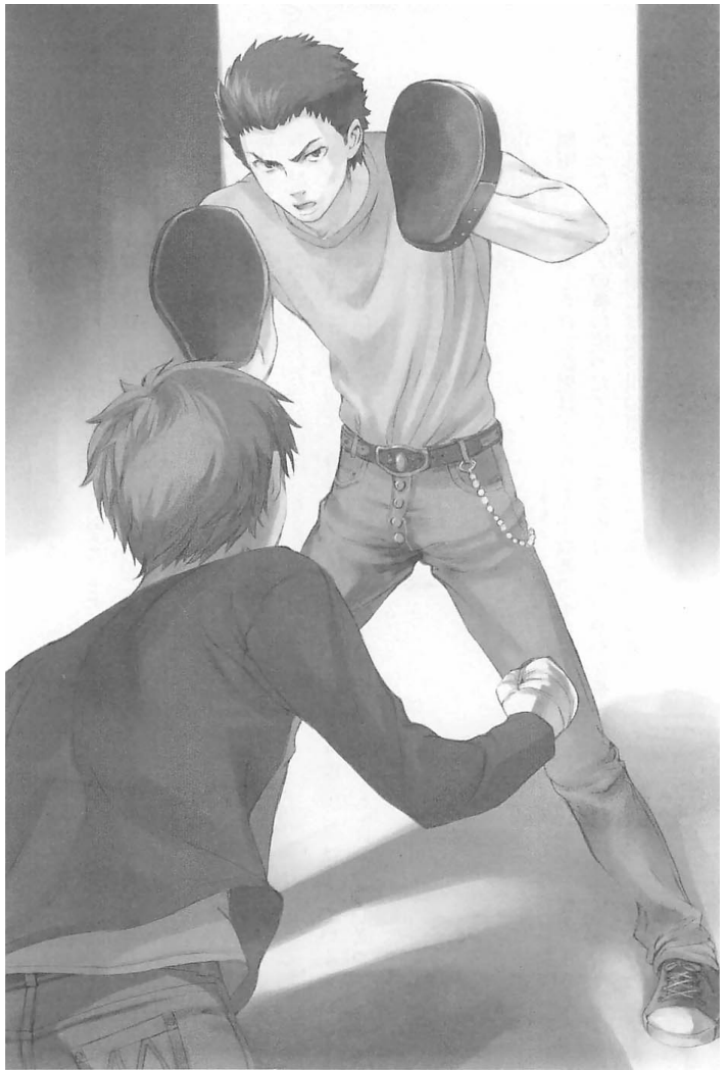
I lowered my head and started to hesitate. I was unable to raise my fists.

"Just start! Sometimes, it's better for people to look for something to hit. Don't think of anything, just start!"

I raised my head and saw senpai smiling.

"I will accept your weak, powerless punches."

My shoulders trembled, and a viscous liquid rose from the upper part of my waist to my flanks. If I just stood there without moving, I would probably just scream without a reason, so I flung out my tightly clenched fists.



My outstretched right fist made a ‘dong’ sound, and was absorbed by the boxing gloves. A numbing pain was transmitted to my elbows and shoulders. I didn’t care, and lashed out with my left fist. Colliding with the punching gloves as soon as I straightened my hands, the pain could be felt even from my teeth. Right, left, right, I continuously hit Tetsu-senpai’s large silhouette. Even though I gave punched a lot, the tightly held boxing gloves would receive my fists, reflecting the attack back to my body. It hurts. When you hit people, your own self would feel pain. It’s a simple and persuasive

fact. Did Ayaka feel pain at that moment too? Or did she have no time to feel pain? Sweat trickled into my eyes, blurring my vision. I could only hear my rapid breathing and the sound of me hitting the punching gloves. This is a real sound that belonged to me, and real pain.

I don't know how long I've practiced, but before I knew it, I stood with my back bent, panting while holding the worn tires. As I worked out suddenly, my ears rang and my chest hurt. Sweat flowed from my forehead to my chin.

At moment, I finally knew why I came to the ramen shop – for Ayaka, and for myself.

I raised my head, and saw Tetsu-senpai looking relaxed.

"Do you want practice some more?"

I shook my head.

"Thank….. you, that's…… all for today."

I took off the bandages and handed it back to senpai, my body still burning. That's quite natural, it's because I'm still alive. Ayaka might not feel this heat any more, but at least I could still stand up with my own two feet.

"I'll go look for Alice."

*

The room was dimly lit because of the tens of monitors in the room. Alice was sitting on the bedside. It might be because of her black, luscious hair, but it made her silhouette look just like a vase, and the vase was filled with stars in the galaxy.

"This is the way that I express my sadness, because I do not know of any other way."

Alice said with her back against me. In the darkness, the speed of Alice hammering on the keyboard was rapid, and the sound was

like the rapid-fire sound of an automatic rifle used in a war that was at the other side of the Earth.

“I’ve checked Ayaka’s medical records, but actually I know that I didn’t have to do that. The one who understands the most that Ayaka could not recover ever again, would probably be you, who had seen it with your own eyes.”

Could not—recover.

Is that true? Although the doctors have said, Ayaka would probably need to lie on the bed all her life, passing her days in a vegetative state.

“But you still came to to look for me. I’ve actually though that you’d close yourself in your room, or have already attempted suicide.”

“Is that so?”

I sat down in front of the bed. Alice stopped typing on the keyboard and turned around. The colorful pajamas looked like it was the color of mercury due to the rays of light by the monitor, while the eyes looked as though they would crumble if you just touch it, and were emitting a weak ray of light.

“…… You wouldn’t even get angry if I said that.”

“Eh?”

“No, nothing, it’s my bad.”

I think I’ve heard something incredible, Alice actually apologized to me.

“I have no reason to get angry. If nobody cares about me, then I would probably turn out like you have said.”

“Really? Then you should be thankful to the shopkeeper who’s so good at making ice creams.”

I nodded my head.

“Speak your request!”

“Alice, you’re a detective, right?”

“I’m not an ordinary detective, but a NEET detective!”

“One who could search the whole world without taking a step out of the room, and find out the truth?”

“It is as you have said.” Alice showed her sad eyes, smiling self-mockingly.

Of course I don’t believe her exaggerated promotions, but I don’t have any other people to turn to.

“Then……” I swallowed, “I would like to request you to investigate something for me.”

I spoke of it myself, but it sounded somewhat funny.

At that moment, I was stared at by Alice’s large, deep eyes, and experienced the pain of a stopped breathing. The young girl said with a faint voice:

“What do you wish to know?”

“Why did Ayaka…… turn out like that?”

Alice drooped her long eyelashes, looking as if she’s thinking, and also looked like she was listening to a sound that she couldn’t hear.

“…… Do you still remember what I’ve said before? A detective is the representative of the deceased, looking for lost words from their graves, hurting the living for the sake of protecting the honour of the deceased, and condemning the dead for the sake of consoling the living.”

“I remember.”

Alice opened her eyes.

“Then I’ll ask you once again, my investigation might expose what

Ayaka wanted to hide, or even destroy your ignorant but peaceful life. Do you still want to know even so?”

Even so—

Even so, I--

“I still want to know.”

Alice gave a huge sigh.

“I understand, then I accept your request. You don’t need to pay me, because I, too, wish to know the answer.”

I widened my eyes.

“…… Eh?”

“I’ve already figured out what you want to know, although all of this is too late……”

“The- then……”

Alice’s sharp voice interrupted my words.

“Things are already clear, you don’t need to ponder why Ayaka wanted to die, the thing that I wish to know of is not this.”

“What are you talking abo……”

“What I wish to know is, ‘Why did Ayaka choose to die at school’.”

I was momentarily dumbstruck, and couldn’t understand what Alice wanted to say.

“The day before she committed suicide was Monday, and Ayaka didn’t go to school, you know of this too. But according to witnesses, Ayaka went to school after school finished for some reason, and didn’t go back home. On Monday night, Ayaka had already hid herself on the rooftop, then waited until morning to commit suicide from the rooftop. Do you understand? Ayaka didn’t just impulsively ran to the school rooftop to commit suicide, but

had chosen to commit suicide at the school rooftop from the start. Why did she do so?”

I felt a chill across my back.

The reason that she chose to die at school. Choosing…… the place that she’d die?

“I don’t understand. I don’t understand why Ayaka wanted to die at school, but I must know. So I need your help, as the person who’s the closest with Ayaka these two months is you.”

“Me……? Why? Why do you want to know about this?”

Alice raised one side of her brows with her eyes widened, looking like she’s angry or mystified.

“Why? Why do I want to know about this? You’re asking me this question? You who wanted to know why Ayaka committed suicide, actually asked me this question?”

“Ah……”

“Just like you, I must know the reason for why Ayaka committed suicide, because I should be able to prevent her from doing that. If I knew about this earlier, knowing much more, I could prevent Ayaka from committing suicide. It’s my fault that Ayaka turned out like that. Even if things have already happened, I must know about that still, although it’s already too late. If I don’t do that, I will, I will……”

Alice made a sound as if she was forced into a corner and said repeatedly. I suppressed the emotions accumulated at my chest. What are the emotions that the young girl in front of me showed me? Nostalgia, pain and helplessness.

"Are you willing to help me? Let’s just make it as the payment for your request."

Alice looked at me like a drowning person clutching at a straw, the faint rays of light, the stars in the glass, now looked as if they were going to shatter.

The hands stretched towards my hand—

And I took hold of it.

“I understand, so I’ll be your assistant, right?”

Alice heard my answer, and a surprised expression surfaced on her face.

The cold fingers.

The wet eyes filled with darkness.

All of them melted in a warm smile.

Chapter 4

I looked at the sign, which was just a piece of coarse, white paper with ‘No Entry’ written on it, that was stuck onto the door of the rooftop, and suddenly thought of something meaningless. Some people say that there are some things in life that can’t be restored, and there are some people who don’t think so, but I would unquestionably support the former. If the ‘something that can’t be restored’ refers to death, the ‘something that can’t be restored’ theory can’t be established. Why is that? That’s because the moment when a person dies, does not count as his or her life anymore.

But what about the deaths of other people? Are those things that could not be restored as well? Indeed, humans cannot revive from their deaths, so the emptiness that is formed in one’s heart is filled by some other people or things; or they can close their own heart, sealing it with tape. As for the people who couldn’t do that, they would choose to commit suicide, so life truly does not have things that can’t be restored. If it was me from last week, I might have already let go, but after seeing a person who can’t even die, I learnt a terrible lesson.

There are only things that couldn’t be restored in life.

Although I don’t really know if it’s right or not.

The only thing that I could make sure of is, the door to the rooftop has already been locked up. It seemed that the rooftop is being temporarily sealed off. The rooftop where Ayaka jumped off of was not the rooftop of the south school building where we tended to the plants, but the north school building in the opposite direction, but that’s not the point.

I turned the handle, gave up on opening the door to the rooftop, and went down the stairs. I’m probably just not suited to being a detective. For a more capable person, they would probably think of a way to borrow the keys to the rooftop, or even just climb up the pipes to reach their destination!

*

A detective's assistant.

The employment contract between Alice and I was established the second day. Alice called me over and asked me to tell her everything I know about Ayaka. Geez, she's such an inconsiderate person. After suffering for an hour, Alice said in a straightforward manner:

"Okay, I get it. All the clues have been tied up."

So what's the answer? But Alice refused to tell me.

"What I know now is the truth, not the facts!" Alice's words had me at a loss.

"The truth and the facts…… What's the difference?"

"Really, to put it bluntly it's just my intuition. It's enough if I alone knew the truth, but my pride does not allow me to just report the truth to my clients."

"Hmmm…… Is it because you don't have evidence yet?"

"Well, that's the case in short. So that's why I told you to help do the chores around here, which is your payment for the information by labor work. If I told you about the information right now, doesn't that mean that I don't get an equal payment? If you want to gloss through the facts, and only know the truth, you could just investigate it yourself! Go! Just work hard like a mule that has its eyes covered!"

The scene when Alice held my hand with tears in her eyes was like a scam. Today she used her usual tone and said to me:

"Just continue your activities in the Gardening Club as usual and observe closely where Ayaka had been. That's your first job."

*

That was why I continued to walk to the garden.

There was not even one person at the courtyard after school. It might be because it's near the exams, or it might be because it's winter right now, but another reason would be the large, black stains spread on the ground between the garden and the school buildings. I stood beside the black stains and looked for awhile. It was the first time I saw with my own eyes the true feeling of death, and it was still present at the scene. Rain or snow might wash it away eventually, but right now the stains are still on the ground.

There's nothing else.

What could you do with this kind of thing? Alice had already explained that she'd already understood the reason for Ayaka committing suicide, but a will couldn't be found, the police were staying silent, while the magazines were just targeting Ayaka's family that couldn't be said to be favorable. The things that other people could not see, could you see them from the small room that was full of machines?

Just thinking about this is meaningless, so I walked towards my final destination— the greenhouse behind the school building. That was Ayaka's holy ground. I borrowed the keys to the greenhouse from the staffroom, and the strong smell of grass came upon me as soon as I opened the door.

The area of the floor was about twice as big as my room, and was about twelve tatamis big. The greenhouse looked somewhat desolate, I only saw a row of wilting tropical plants arranged on a rack, not even flowering. Probably someone sorted out the place after Ayaka committed suicide?

When I raised my head, I saw pipes interlacing on the ceiling, and there were something that looked like a sprinkler. They probably spray fertilizers or water automatically? There were also additional lighting equipments. This is obviously just a normal high school, so why is there such an advanced greenhouse? Is the school budget that big?

I sat down on the lower part of a rack and leaned against it. I closed

my eyes, allowing my body to sink into the smell of the soil that was like warm water.

We couldn't find Toshi, and Ayaka was not even here anymore. There's only me left in the place that belonged to us, while only the drug addicts who were hospitalized or arrested increased gradually.

My phone in my pocket suddenly rang. I was startled, and bumped my head on the rack on top of it.

'It's me. Are you working seriously? You aren't lying down thinking about meaningless things over and over again, are you? Although I'm a NEET, I'm very strict regarding other people's laziness, so please remember that.'

A young girl's voice came from the other side of the phone. I couldn't help but look around the greenhouse. There aren't any surveillance cameras over here, are there?"

'You're probably still at school right now, right?'

"…… Yeah, I'm in the greenhouse. I followed your instructions to closely observe the greenhouse."

'Good. I want to confirm something with you, are there two entrances to the greenhouse?'

I stood up. Two entrances?

At the opposite of the door that I came in from, there is indeed another identical steel door.

Why did Alice know about this? Is having two doors in a greenhouse that common? Or did she find out about that by searching the internet?

"Open the other door."

"But it's a wall at the other side of the door!"

The greenhouse was at a corner of the school, and looked as if it's squeezed by the surrounding walls.

‘Do you think I don’t even know about something like that? Stop that nonsense, and just do it.”

Opening the lock, a deep ‘dong’ sound came right after I turned the handle. I could only open it for about ten centimeters or so.

“Can’t open it!”

‘…… Do you hear it? Yeah, it should probably be at that part…… A plank? It’s probably just that, right?’

Alice suddenly said some incomprehensible words, and her voice sounded somewhat far. Ah, she might be talking with some other people. When I was thinking about meaningless stuff again, the door suddenly opened. Holding the handle, I was dragged forward and almost fell down.

Outside the door was a silhouette. Raising my head, I crossed eyes with the sharp gaze of a beast, and my mind went blank momentarily.

It was Yondaime.

Why is it Yondaime? And why did the door open?

Did something happen? I really don’t understand.

Holding a phone, Yondaime said: “The door’s open, yeah, that’s right. Hmm…… No, they’ve been cleared away, nothing left. To continue tailing is just a waste of time.” I did just hear Yondaime’s answering voice just now.

‘Then it’s up to you after this. There’s probably a surprised Narumi sprawled on the ground, so please explain things to him, I’m really busy, you know.’

“He- Heyhey, Alice!”

The voice stopped coming from Yondaime’s phone. After a moment, there was an uncomfortable silence between Yondaime and I. Yondaime walked into the greenhouse after tch-ing, and I hastily stepped aside. Even then, Yondaime just glared at me, not saying

anything. I shifted my gaze and looked outside the door, finally solving the mystery that was in front of me.

A tower-shaped wooden signboard and dirty tombstones covered with dust could be seen at the other side of the door— it was the graveyard beside the school. The wall that was close to the entrance of the greenhouse fell coincidentally, and was only blocked by a large plank.

But why did Alice know of this shortcut? Also, why did Yondaime appear here?

Yondaime ignored me, and used his phone to take photos of the interior of the greenhouse.

“Yondaime, why are you here?”

“Don’t call me Yondaime.”

“Err, then should I call you Sou-san?”

“When did you become a part of our group?”

‘Narumi, Yondaime’s surname is Hinamura, so you can just call him Hina. He’ll be thrilled.”

Uwaah, Alice didn’t hang up on me yet. With a ferocious expression, Yondaime snatched my phone and hung up on Alice. I though that he would just crush my phone.

“…… Hi- Hina?” “I’ll kill you!” Yondaime stuffed my phone into my mouth. What is this guy doing!

“Your job is to open the lock of the greenhouse, right? Just get out of here since you’ve done your job.”

Facing Yondaime’s comment, I could only stare.

“…… What’s with that?”

“Didn’t Alice say anything to you?”

Feeling miserable, I nodded. Yondaime heaved a long sigh.

“Then think about it clearly.”

The connection between Yondaime and Ayaka……

…… is Toshi. Only Toshi, and Angel Fix.

Then, did Ayaka commit suicide because of Toshi? But what’s their connection with the greenhouse? Fragments of my memories swirled around in my mind, just like a puzzle that couldn’t be completed.

“Wait, please wait!”

I hurriedly called Yondaime who was about to walk out of the greenhouse. Yondaime turned around, his wolfish eyes looking even more vicious.

“…… Is Ayaka related to the drug? Why, is there—“

“Of course they’re related, you idiot! If it wasn't because of that thing, you could still continue your peaceful activities of the Gardening Club. Can’t you see that something was wrong if things didn’t happen?”

I didn’t know how to answer him.

The door to the cemetery slammed shut, leaving me alone in the greenhouse along with the warm heat of the plants.

Is it because of the drug? Did Ayaka fall into a coma because of the detestable pink pills? Why? Is it because Toshi did something?

It was all the fault of Angel Fix.

No matter how I pondered, there was no progress. I gave up on thinking, went back to the staffroom and returned the key. When I was about to walk out of the staffroom, Sayuri-sensei called me.

“Although I know that it’s not appropriate asking you about this right now, but what are you going to do concerning the Gardening

Club?”

“What to do?”

“After all…… something like this happened, so you’re the only remaining member of the club.”

Ahh, that’s right. I recalled the day when I met Ayaka, and our promise.

“Of course, I would hope that you could continue, and would ask other students if they’re interested in joining. Some teachers also said that the garden must have someone tending to it.”

I was silent, in a deep thought. To be honest, I don’t know a thing about gardening, so if I must continue club activities alone until April, when recruiting starts, it’s impossible. But I didn’t want to just let the garden and greenhouse stay bare, because those places belonged to Ayaka.

Even if she’s not coming back anymore.

It seemed that Sayuri-sensei misunderstood my silence.

“Sorry for suddenly asking you about things like this. You probably have your own thoughts about it. If you don’t want to continue being in the club, I wouldn’t force you to.”

“Err……”

Sayuri-sensei had already been a teacher for five years now. Even though she’s single, there are rumors circulating her as she looked extremely pretty. Giving out a charming expression with her bright eyes is her weapon. Being stared at with this look, I surrendered.

“It’s not that I don’t want to continue……”

“Really?”

A relieved expression appeared on Sayuri-sensei’s face.

“Those are Shinozaki’s precious flowers, so I hope that we can leave

them alone. Additionally, the flowers in the greenhouse are about to bloom……”

…… About to bloom?

“Almost all of the plants in the greenhouse have disappeared, aren’t they disposed of by you?”

Sayuri-sensei’s eyes turned round.

“Disappeared? Really?”

She balanced her pen on her lower lip and thought for awhile.

“Could it be Shinozaki who disposed of them?”

Ayaka disposed of them?

It might be because of that, for taking care……Wait, that’s not right……

I recalled the words that Yondaime have said. He said while talking to Alice on the phone: “They were cleared away.”

Ayaka and the greenhouse.

Toshi.

Angel Fix.

The fragments in my mind started to piece together.

*

It was January when I rode my bike to the ramen shop in a frenzy, while the sun have set quickly. Looking past the red rays bathing the curtains, there were not even one customer in the shop. I rode my bike until I collided with the plastic barrel behind the shop, balanced my bike on the wall and ran to the stairs.

Just when I was about to run upstairs, Min-san called me from the kitchen.

“Come in and sit down.”

“I’m busy right now.”

“Stop blabbering and sit down, or I’ll hit you.”

Because Min-san was waving her soup ladle vigorously, I went into the shop obediently and sat on the seat in front of the counter.

Min-san plopped a paper cup in front of me, a pomelo smoothie. The sour taste prickled my brain like frozen needles. It was as though the warmth of my body was absorbed by the smoothie, and then a mild spiciness came upon me, quite a mysterious flavor. I suddenly remembered that it was winter right now, and my body started to shiver.

“I’ve put ginger in the smoothie.”

“Oh……” As she said, it was the spiciness of ginger. Surprisingly, the taste of pomelos and ginger blend quite well together……

“It’s a dessert made specially for winter that makes the body feel warm.”

Min-san smiled triumphantly, puffing up her sarashi-bound chest.

“My dad was an outdoor sports type of person who lived on due to his determination. He used to take me to snowy mountains or to swim in ice cold water, so I usually depended on chewing raw ginger used for cooking soup to support myself.” …… Was she training to become a ninja?

“But I was actually not that good at swimming when I was little.”

“Eh?”

“What’s with that expression, everyone has something that they’re not good at, don’t they?”

Well, that's not really wrong, but I absolutely can't imagine how Min-san looked like when she was little.

"A person who can't swim always flails in the water when drowning, right? I always got scolded by dad because of that. Don't move if you don't know how to swim, and you'll float naturally. But for a person who's drowning, you can't think of these things."

At that moment Min-san stopped and stared at me. That was when I realized that Min-san was lecturing me, although she didn't say so clearly.

My brain calmed down.

Indeed, I wanted to see Alice just minutes before, driven by impulse, and to grab the pajamas-clad girl by her throat and tell her to explain things clearly. But I am completely unsure of what to ask, as I haven't even thought about it. What an idiot I am.

My shoulders sagged. A person who can't swim could just not move and float naturally, but what should I do?

"Min-san……"

"Hmm?" Min-san who was cutting onions stopped and raised her head.

"About…… Ayaka not being here, what do you think about it?"

"Are you an idiot? You don't need to ask another person's opinion for this."

Min-san's voice seemed as if she was really angry.

"If I tell you that I would go and visit her, crying my eyes out, would you feel that you would do that too? If I tell you that I feel okay about it, would you feel that it's okay if you didn't do anything?"

Min-san's words were like Yondaime's fist, heavily pushing against my abdomen. I lowered my head while holding the cup of ice cream and felt that I kept repeating the same stupid thing these few

months, surprising the other people.

I lowered my head and stood up.

“I’m going to Alice’s office for awhile.”

“Okay.”

Min-san’s outstretched hands appeared before my eyes. She placed a paper cup that was closed with a lid— a pomelo smoothie like what I’ve just eaten just now.

“Take it to that girl, I think she’s in a bad mood today too.”

*

As Min-san have guessed, Alice looked terrible. It was a cold month, but the air-conditioner was still going strong. Empty cans of Dr. Pepper were stacked in front of her bed like a beehive. The bed was led by Mocha Bear (Yondaime used his professional skills to fix the ears on again), while an army of other dolls and plushies surrounded her. A cooling paste was stuck onto her forehead, while black circles appeared below her eyes.

“How courageous you are, coming into my territory wearing thick clothes like a Russian soldier. I’ll give you two choices, take off the sports get-up that makes people feel hot as soon as they see it, or you can get out of my room.”

“…… I want to ask you every time, why do you make your room feel so cold?”

“Are the things that are at the two sides of your head handles used for moving? I’m asking if you’re going to get out or to take them off!”

I glumly took off my sports jacket. Brrrrrr, it’s so cold. Alice waved at the wall that was full of machines.

“My eyes and ears would give off heat so long as they could move. Compared to the eternal darkness and silence, what’s a little coldness going to do."

“But I think that humans do not need to work in coordination with that.”

My teeth clattered while I was answering due to the cold.

“How arrogant. You’re really a surprisingly self-centered human, and can’t be helped at all. Do you want the environment to cooperate with humans? That is a stupid behavior. According to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle and Gödel’s incompleteness theorem, from the moment when humans lost to God, they found that changing themselves would be better than using philosophy or natural science to change the world. Everyone has already changed direction, but you alone are still standing on a sinking ship, blankly waving the flag of an alchemist. That’s rare. If I made your life into a movie, we’d probably get all the prizes.”

“Argh……”

Hehe, so I’m an arrogant and self-centered human. So that’s it, I’ve just noticed when Alice said that about me. Although all of that just sounded like Alice making excuses, I’ve already surrendered to the coldness and Alice’s articulate debates.

“Okay, sorry. I’ll even take off the sweater, okay?”

Alice widened her eyes.

“…… What an oddball you are. An air conditioner is obviously one of the assets that humans use for the nature to coordinate with humans, but why did you give up on debating so quickly? You could at least say that I’m the one who’s self-centered.”

“No……”

I’ve suddenly realized that I feel better after Alice scolded me, and could not help but feel somewhat impatient. I’m a hopeless cause.

“I’m somewhat tired right now, so I don’t have the energy to rebuke

you.”

As Alice started to talk again, I hurriedly handed the smoothie to her so that she would shut up.

After opening the lid, Alice’s eyes sparkled because of the sweet fragrance of the pamelo, but right after she ate a mouthful, she made a ‘Wuwu～’ noise, and her eyes squinted into a straight line.

“What is it?”

“It’s spicy……”

Alice said with tears in her eyes. Is it so spicy that it could make people cry?

“Master is so impressive……. An amazingness that even I could not predict…… Wuwu……～”

“Are you okay?”

“…… I’m alright. It’s just too tasty, I’m going to eat them all up!”

Alice ate the smoothie with her mouth pouting, looking like she wanted to cry out. Her whole body contorted for each mouthful that she had.

“Don’t force yourself to do it. I’ll eat up the rest of them for you.”

“Why are you so greedy! You’ve already eaten some downstairs, but you still want to eat up my share. I won’t even give you one mouthful.”

Alice stuck out her tongue at me, then used ten minutes to eat it all up. It seemed that the spiciness still lingered on her tongue even after she finished eating it. Alice pouted, her eyes almost squinted into a line. She waved her hands while sitting on the carpet like she wanted to say something, so I took out a can of Dr. Pepper and handed it to her.

After drinking the whole can of Dr. Pepper in one gulp, Alice sighed, and seemed like her mood was much better.

“As my assistant, it seems that you’ve accumulated much experience. You could even finish your main job without me even saying anything. Your performance as an assistant is passable like this.”

“So the main job of an assistant is to get Dr. Pepper……”

“Do you think that I’m wrong about this?”

No, it’s clear what you’re going to say!

“So next, let’s solve your problem! Yondaime probably didn’t explain anything to you, so just ask if you have any questions! Although I might not answer you.”

Then what does this count as?

I sank into deep thought. Indeed, I would be taken as an idiot by Alice no matter what I ask, and might not answer me. But sometimes, not answering is also an answer.

And also……

I’m not always fumbling in the dark.

“Don’t you have something you wanted to ask me?”

Alice bent her knees, placed her chin on them and tilted her head.

“I’m thinking of what to ask you.”

“Well, that’s some growth!”

That’s probably because of Min-san’s pamelo smoothie. If I straightaway rushed in here, and said whatever I thought, Alice would probably make me as an idiot again.

I thought for a long time and said:

“Can you give me a copy of the information about Angel Fix? The one with the photos.”

The smile vanished from Alice’s face. She didn’t answer at first, and

the room was just filled with the sound of the cooling fan of the CPUs. I thought in instinct: Ahh, I've asked the right question. At the same time, I felt as if my heart was stuffed to the bottom of my shoes.

Finally, Alice muttered:

"Are you mentally prepared to dig the grave of the deceased?"

I—

nodded slightly.

Alice showed me her sad eyes, nodded and answered me.

"I understand, here's the information. But before I give it to you, there's something I need to ask you."

Being an assistant needs a heavy price. Alice sat on her bed and beckoned at me. Eh? Wait a sec? To the bed? Is she telling me to get on her bed?

"What are you dilly-dallying for? Are your hands so long that you could press the keyboard from there?"

"…… Keyboard?"

"The job that I'm requesting you to do requires the use of a computer, so I'm asking you to come over here."

"Ah, oh……"

So that my embarrassing misunderstanding would not be found out, I turned around and stood up.

"Err, may I get on your bed?"

"Just hurry up."

On the blanket, I politely shifted over to Alice's side by using my knees. Being on the same bed as a girl, that makes me really nervous.

“You’re good at editing photos, right? Then I’ll hand this picture to you.”

Alice pointed at the bottom of her screen. She had opened Photoshop, and a young man with a sharp chin was shown on the screen.

“Editing?”

“That’s right, because this information is going to be photocopied and distributed. Haven’t you heard of it before? Humans don’t remember things by their original appearance, so a person would have a stronger impression on something if the facial features are more emphasized. It’s the same with a portrait.”

Ahhh, I think I’ve heard of that before. My gaze fell on the screen again.

At that moment, a chill crept up my back. I’ve saw this man before. But where?

“…… Who is this guy?”

“His name is Shirou Hakamizaka, a researcher.”

I stared at Alice in surprise. Hakamizaka?

I looked at the screen again. A sharp chin, a face that looks intellectual, this probably came from a driving license or something, huh? There isn’t even the hint of a smile on his face. I tried to put on a pair of frameless glasses in my mind…… I’ve got it! That’s right, on the day that Toshi disappeared, I spotted this guy who makes people feel uneasy near the zebra crossings.

“He enrolled into T Medical University seven years ago, not in Pharmacy, but Life Sciences. It’s somewhat strange if you say that it’s a subject for researching genetic inheritance. I’ve heard that his results are quite good, and even went to Iran to study abroad. He probably found that there.”

Found? Found what?

“That’s it!”

Alice handed a pile of papers to me, and the photo of a red flower was on the topmost paper. It was the papers that I saw that time.

“Originally, the flowers on the photo isn’t that rare, and wouldn’t have any medical effects, so Hakamizaka probably found its mutated variety. At the research center, we found it from plants that had similar alkaloids. This is the payment for your labor, I’ll just give it to you first! So let’s ignore the information for now……”

“The people that are related to this incident is not only Hakamizaka, I’ve thoroughly investigated the people that might have relations with him. I’m not sure if every one of them are related with the drug, but anyways, this is a family business-type drug organization. Hakamizaka’s father is a powerful second-generation politician, so their modal probably comes from Hakamizaka’s usual pocket money. I’ve investigated the assets under his father’s name, but couldn’t find their current location yet. It’s both thoughtful and daring, a mere researcher starting from zero, looking for people online, nurturing the raw material, manufacturing, and then selling them cheaply. This is why they haven’t been caught until now.”

Alice enlarged the other windows for me. Most of them are not taken from the front, and are parts of a group photo or some very unclear photos.

“Where did you find all this?”

“I’ve already said that I’m a NEET detective, right? The hardest thing was to find out Shirou Hakamizaka’s phone number, while the others were a cinch.”

I was taken aback. So she DOES know how to check phone logs?

“So you’re really a hacker……”

“I’m not a hacker. A hacker is originally a name the students in Massachusetts Institute of Technology gave to the people who do large pranks. What you’re saying is probably a cracker who steals

information. I'm different from a cracker, which I've told you a lot of times. I'm a NEET detective. So stop that nonsense and turn your attention to the screen."

Alice caught hold of my face and turned my head to the computer screen.

I wouldn't mistake the person on the last screen, it's Toshi. With the same eyes as Ayaka, the same outline as Ayaka, I almost cried out loud. Even though I knew that from the start……. Even though I knew that from the start……

"Are you…… sure?"

In the end I still asked. Alice answered me with a gentle voice:

"We're not sure yet. The world that I can see is only the limited scenes of the limitless small windows on the network. In chance, Toshi bumped into Hakamizaka at a drug discussing website, and then became friends. Toshi might have just gotten the Angel Fix straight from Hakamizaka, and did not take part in the manufacturing or dealing of the drug. I cannot deny the possibility of this."

Alice's words were like she's reading from a script, making people feel empty.

"There are a few places in Toshi's behavior that are perplexing. Additionally, when he came to the ramen shop that day, he probably wasn't trying to get money from Ayaka."

"…… Eh?"

"Toshi did ask you, right? If Yondaime came to my office or not. And then he said that it's the only thing that he wanted to ask, right?"

"Ah……"

I remembered, Toshi DID say that. At that time, I wasn't sure why Toshi wanted to ask that, but knowing what Toshi hid, I understand now.

“He’s here to check out…… if Alice and Yondaime have started to investigate the matter about the drug?”

“This is still speculation, and not the truth. But this hypothesis has a contradiction. Listen, if Toshi was already guarded against me, why did he still let you see the Angel Fix?”

I became silent.

It was indeed strange. If he felt that Alice had started to investigate the matter, he probably wouldn’t be so careless that he’d show me his confused look after he took the drug.

Hakamizaka did say that he finally found Toshi or something like that, so that’s probably Toshi’s own free will?

I don’t get it.

If the person who heard about Angel Fix was not me, but a more sensitive person, they would probably think of Yondaime or Alice, who were investigating this matter, and it would not turn out like this. If it wasn’t me……

Why me?

Why did Toshi—

I don’t get it.

“You don’t get it, and I don’t understand either, so……”

Alice lightly raised my hand and placed it on the mouse. The pointer on the screen shook.

“I’m the same as you. You wanted to use the information and your own eyes and ears to confirm the truth, and to learn the truth, I want to find Toshi.”

Editing six photos and combining them into one took two hours. Alice squatted by my side, staring at the edited pictures on the screen. Usually, she would not stop talking even for a moment, but only at these times would she be silent. That made me so nervous. I

tried not to look at Alice's direction, and focused my attention on the computer screen. My neck aches… This is the first time that I felt uncomfortable when the other party isn't talking.

"Alice, I'm done."

"Hmmmmmm…… Mnn."

So she fell asleep. That's why she was so silent.

"You're so slow that you made me fall asleep. Hmm, that's not bad."

Not even a word of consolation. Never mind. Alice pushed me away, activated the mailing system and mailed the zipped folder. After that, she pulled out a phone from behind the messy computer rack.

"…… Yondaime? Mn, it's me. We've finished editing the photo, and I sent it there already…… Hmm? That's a zipped folder! Zipped. Eh? Just double click it with your mouse and print it in A4 size. Nonono, there should be paint on your computer right? No? Ahhh, that's right, your computer was picked up by Major and then remodeled right, so at least just download a free editing software! What? You don't get it? At least get me a person who understands……"

When she was talking on the phone, Alice's voice was sometimes so low that it's scary, and sometime it rose like she's angry. In the end, Alice screamed: "I had enough! Forget it! I'll just tell Narumi to go there right now. Just you wait!" and then hung up. Eh? Wait a minute……How does that concern me?

"So it's like that……"

Alice looked at me and said determinedly. So what?

"The people in Hirasaka-gumi doesn't even have basic knowledge about computers, it's terrible. Even if it's God who's educating idiots, He would feel frustrated too. Therefore it's better for you to go."

"Err, no, wait a sec……"

“This is also the job of an assistant, so hurry up and go.”

Without giving me a chance to rebuke her, I was chased out of the detective firm.

*

“I didn’t think that there would be a day when we need your help……”

Yondaime said with a bitter expression. At the interior of Hirasaka-gumi, there were simple beds, a small kitchen, and a bridge, while there was a desk and an old computer further inside the room. As though we were attracted to the rays of light emitted by the monitor, the followers were tidily arranged by my side, led by Yondaime, while I sat on the chair in the middle with my body curled up.

“Sou-san, we’ve already gathered down here.”

The lackey who opened the door and went in reported.

“Hey! Hurry up and fix it!”

The tall lackey crossed over my shoulders and said with his eyes glued to the screen, and even knocked on my head. It was one of the bodyguards that I saw before, the one who was as tall as an electric pole.

“I’m downloading the file right now.”

While thinking to myself why am I in such a mess, I opened the large enterprising website that provided free softwares and downloaded the simplest video processing software. It seemed that Major installed only the most basic applications on the computer. The hard disk was almost completely empty, only the mailing software has any trace of usage. I thought that young people nowadays were all good at using computers, but now I realized that wasn’t the case.

As soon as I opened the picture that I’ve edited, the surrounding

people made an astonished sound. You don't need to be so surprised, do you? I adjusted the size of the picture to A4 size and then printed it out. While being guarded in bated breath by the men wearing the black T-shirts with their emblem on it, the color printer slowly printed out the paper that had the faces of six people on it.

"Whoa!"

"That's so incredible!"

"A miracle!"

"It's so unbelievable that I don't even understand what I'm seeing."

"Wow, print five more…… No, please print five more copies."

After six copies of the pictures were printed, the person who rushed me just now, Pole, was now clutching at my shoulders with his eyes wet.

"Sorry! As expected from Ane-san's assistant! I've wronged you, aniki!"

"Thanks for your hard work, aniki!"

"Thanks for your hard work."

Nonono, don't treat me like that. Yondaime took the six papers with a peeved expression on his face, distributed them to the others and said: "Don't be stupid. Take it to a convenience store and photocopy two hundred copies for each paper."

"Understood! I shall go hone my manly aura right away."

"Understood!"

*

There were quite a lot of people gathered at the parking lot below the office of Hirasaka-gumi. The empty space that could accommodate twenty cars at most was densely packed with people,

who were muttering to each other in the darkness. They were all ordinary young people who could just hang out around the streets. A hundred…… Two hundred….. No, it should be more? The cold air of the winter evening was completely chased out of the parking lot. All of them were men, so they emitted an odd atmosphere. The place where the fans gather before a concert starts would feel like this too, probably?

“Aniki, please walk over here.”

A man wearing a black T-shirt pulled at my collar as I was standing at the entrance, flustered, and brought me to further in the right side. The guys with an emblem on their shirts were standing in a row like cheerleaders. But really, I’m just here to get back my bike. I’m now seriously regretting my decision. I should’ve parked outside!

“Does Hirasaka-gumi have that many people?”

The person seemed to hear my mutterings.

“No, the people who are truly in the group are just twenty something, but the small groups over here listen to Sou-san. Sou-san looks after the jobless people over here, so they would come over here if he called them.”

I sighed and looked at the crowd. The heat that they were emitting was giving me a headache. When I started to straighten my back, looked around and was thinking:: “I’ll get out of here double quick, after I find my bike.”, the noise suddenly piped down.

The gazes of the people were all focused on Yondaime. With his back to the greenish white lights outside, Yondaime walked into the entrance of the parking lot from the slope. His crimson coat rolled up because of the wind formed by atmospheric pressure. It could be felt that everyone was waiting for Yondaime to speak, and the matter about my bike disappeared from my mind in a flash.

. “Some people were throwing rubbish randomly in this area.”

Yondaime said in a calm tone.

“It’s pink trash that has grown wings. The police didn’t do anything until someone was stabbed recently, because this kind of drug only appears on the streets, and is not sold in an organization. The people who made and sold it are nobodies like us.”

Two hundred men nodded at the same time, forming a small wave.

“So we’ll just deal with this problem ourselves. Because the people who foamed at their mouths because of their addiction, the people who were hurt by the drug addicts who were clouded mentally after taking drugs, are all our mates. The police would only take action after four or five people have died, and it’ll be too late by that time. Who could prevent this from happening?”

As an answer to Yondaime’s question, quite a few types of answers interlaced in the air. Noise rang in the darkness as though an express train passed through, because of the angry shouts of the two hundred people with raised hands. Even in the din, Yondaime’s voice still rang clearly.

“That’s right, only us. If we handed things to the police, the stupid nobodies could continue their monkey business for a month or so, would be arrested and sent to the jail or youth detention center, and would be let out after three years or so.”

Angry shouts of ‘What a joke!’, ‘Kill them!’ and so on could be heard. I shivered. Over two hundred vicious beasts would be let out the streets at the same time because of Yondaime’s orders.

“So have you got the photo already? We aren’t sure if the ones on them are related to the drug, so don’t act recklessly after finding them. Getting the truth out of them is Hirasaka-gumi’s job, so don’t you guys risk getting arrested. Just looking for them is okay, photocopying them and giving them to other people is alright too. If you find a person who’s selling the drug, catch him even if he’s not on the piece of paper. When things end, Hirasaka-gumi will take care of things.”

Yondaime looked at me—No, at the black shirted men beside me.

“Give them a warning, let everyone know better than to do things on this street.”

After the crowd of two hundred or so people went out, I collapsed onto the empty parking lot and rested for awhile. Long shadows of the members of Hirasaka-gumi that were left swayed on the ground. It was as though the angry roars of the beasts were still remaining on the floor and the walls.

“Aniki, is this your bike?”

One of the members pushed my bike from the depths of the parking lot here. I weakly nodded.

“Thank you for your help, we’ll take care of the rest. Don’t be a busybody, there’s nothing you can help.”

Yondaime said towards my back, and left.

“Hey!”

I stood up and called Yondaime, who turned around and glared at me wolfishly.

“If…… you found Toshi…… what are you going to do?”

“God knows, if he’s lucky he’d probably not be sent to the cemetery, but just the hospital.”

Was that a joke? Don’t you know Toshi? But I couldn’t say it.

“Do you think I would have mercy on Toshi just because I know him?”

Yondaime saw through my thoughts.

“One of my followers was stabbed, and his own sister has been harmed by himself and gone into a coma. Can you still forgive him then?

The words pierced deeply into my heart.

Ayaka, was harmed by Toshi?

“I don’t care how you think, but taking care of the person we caught is our freedom, and our responsibility.”

The other members of Hirasaka-gumi nodded seriously.

After Yondime and the other members walked out of the parking lot, I caught hold of the handle of my bike and stood up.

Ayaka was harmed.

Ayaka…… was harmed by Toshi.

*

The next day, I took the papers about Angel Fix I got from Alice to school.

During recess, I went to look for Sayuri-sensei at the staffroom, who’ve just came back.

“What is it? Do you want to have lunch with me because you don’t have any friends? I’m sorry, but I have to prepare for my afternoon class.”

Sayuri-sensei is just as usual, I don’t know what she’s so excited for. Mind your own business, and stop fussing.

“I’m not here to have lunch with you, but to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“You saw the plants in the greenhouse before right? During the second semester.”

“That’s right, I’ve went into the greenhouse quite a few times.”

I took a piece of paper out of my pocket. It’s the picture of the flower that I’ve cut out from the information about Angel Fix. After I handed her the photo, Sayuri-sensei tilted her head and looked at it for a moment, then nodded with an “Oh～” sound.

“There’s a lot of these flowers in the greenhouse before this, all planted using hydroponics. There’s also a pile of boxes on the floor…… But the color of the flower is bluer than in the photo.”

“…… It’s probably a mutated variety.”

My voice sounded like a bubble that drifted up from the bottom of a swimming pool. So the flowers there were a bluish color…… Even if it’s Alice who seems like she knows everything, probably doesn’t know about this, right? In despair, I remembered the bluish purple flowers swaying in the air-conditioned greenhouse.

The flowers that Ayaka planted.

“What type of flower is this?”

“I think its scientific name is Papaverbracteatum Lindl.”

“Uwaah, it sounds like you’re eating screws when you read its name, although the flowers are pretty.”

Seeing as it’s a mutated variety and has been successfully grown, it means that this is a new breed. Shouldn’t we have a new name for it? While thinking of this, I left the staffroom. A crowd of girls were holding their trophies from the Welfare Society, happily chatting away and walked past me.

What name would Hakamizaka give them?

Because of the flowers, Ayaka—

I subconsciously clenched the photo that I’ve cut down.

*

After school, I went to Hanamaru Ramen Shop. There weren’t even a customer in the shop, and only Tetsu-senpai, Major and Hiro were doing something while surrounding the gas tank. I could hear crackling sounds and black smoke wafting up from there.

“What are you guys doing?”

“We’re trying to raise a fire. We don’t know when we're going to become vagrants, so this is a drill for that time.”

Tetsu-senpai said with one hand on the gas tank. There were newspapers,dismantled chairs and table legs burning brightly.

Major said: “Next we just have to learn how to make a cardboard house, then we won’t have to worry when we become vagrants.” What an annoying drill, and it does seem quite realistic.

“Doing these things at the back of the shop would get you a scolding from Min-san!”

“Never mind, never mind. There’s no customers here anyways, and we’re burning the stuff to help clear up the shop. It’s the fifteenth of January today, coincidentally the festival of the dosojin.”

“It’s because of people like you that customers aren’t coming.”

Min-san’s scolding came from the kitchen, even saying that she’ll burn us altogether. It’s now just five in the evening, when the sun sets later, there’ll be customers, right?

“Vice Admiral Fujishima, you could just throw anything you want to burn in here!” Don’t call me vice admiral……

“I burned the posters of the girls that I went out with. I feel so contented right now.”

“I burned the horse racing tickets that I didn’t win for. The blasted Japan Racing Association should remember this, I’ll definitely get back at them this year!”

“I wanted to burn my student ID, but was stopped by them…..”

Don’t burn your student ID, Major. Did you encounter something annoying in school?

I gazed at the crackling flames for awhile, then took a stack of papers from my bag and put it inside. The photocopied papers full of chemical equations and words disappeared in the flames in a flash, turning to ashes.

“That’s for the drugs……”

Hiro seemed to have noticed.

“Alice gave you that, right? Is it okay to burn it?”

“It doesn’t matter, things have already finished.”

“Have you found out about something?”

I nodded dubiously, then squatted down due to a sudden wave of tiredness. Some warmth came from the surface of the gas tank, making the coldness even clearer.

We silently surrounded the burning gas tank, until the sun slowly set. The sounds of customers ordering food from Min-san came from the shop, while the sound of the crackling flames eventually disappeared, as if absorbed by the dark air.

“I finally understood, you’re very similar to Alice.”

Tetsu-senpai muttered. I was taken aback, and raised my head.

“Handling everything yourself, keeping everything to yourself, forcing yourself to the limits but not seeing the others, feeling that everything is your fault, so that’s why you resonate with each other.”

Similar? Resonate? I, myself, don’t think so.

“But Alice is really capable, unlike Vice Admiral Fujishima.”

“Major, that’s too direct of you.”

Tetsu-senpai laughed, but I didn’t. It is indeed as he had said.

“It’s about time we get inside.”

Hiro said, and the customers came in threes and twos.

We couldn’t move the gas tank for now, so we just left it there for now. We shifted to the backdoor of the kitchen. Tetsu-senpai said that he wanted to treat us all to ramen. It seemed that he lost

money from gambling on horses and pachinko lately, so he's treating us to change his luck. I ordered a Chinese garlic naengmyeon. Min-san was about to walk out and complain about something, but went back into the kitchen to make it after she saw me. What acute sense she has.

"In this weather, you want to eat that……"

Tetsu-senpai looked at the dish on top of my knees and stuck his tongue out.

"…… Major, do you remember the day that you ordered this?"

Because of my question, Major and Hiro looked at each other.

"Major got some information from his school. Hiro, Ayaka and I were eating ice cream, then Alice called……"

I thought about that day— when Ayaka was still healthily working in the kitchen and the shop.

"Hiro and I took some stuff to Yondaime, and Ayaka went home early when we came back. Probably it's from that day, Ayaka's behavior became strange……"

I knew that I shouldn't do so, but I couldn't help but look at Hiro.

"Ayaka saw the information of Angel Fix lying around, so she found out that the flowers that she were growing in the greenhouse are the raw material for the drug."

"Is…… it my fault?"

Hiro started to moan. I shook my head while smiling. The smile is okay, probably?

"Leaving the information in the shop isn't your fault, because the only person who noticed that we couldn't let Ayaka see it was me."

"But, Narumi……"

"The following ones would just be my own speculation. About

summer or fall last year, Ayaka accepted the request of Toshi who didn't go home for a long time, to plant flowers in the school greenhouse. Toshi used the back door of the greenhouse to collect the plants on a regular basis. Ayaka knew a bit about Hakamizaka's identity, so she thought that Toshi was helping in an experiment for the university or something like that…… But, she found that things are not so that day."

My words stopped at this moment, then there was a silence. Behind us came the sound of bowls colliding, eating noodles, ordering and eating ice cream.

And then? I don't understand. What would Ayaka who found out that her own brother told her to plant drugs do? Probably she went to question Toshi about it? And then—

I don't understand.

Where did it went wrong, causing Ayaka to commit suicide?

Alice said that she knew the reason. Did she have a piece of the puzzle that I don't have? Or did I miss something? I don't get it, why must Ayaka commit suicide? Why did she do that without even saying something to me? Even though I'm so useless, there's something…… there's something that I could help with……

"Then it's confirmed."

I raised my head because of Tetsu-senpai's statement.

"It's confirmed that Toshi is one of them."

I weakly nodded.

Alice said that Toshi might have no connections with the drug dealing, but being unsure of Toshi's reason he let me see the Angel Fix, everything is unsure.

Yondaime also said that the person they were searching for might not have any connections with the drug.

That's quite the white lie that they fed us.

Angel Fix.

Growing pink wings, it took away Ayaka.

“So what are you going to do then?”

I stared at Tetsu-senpai’s face with my mouth half open. There was not a hint of anger or pity on his face, his eyes were just like a crane game machine that takes coin without an emotion. I couldn’t help but shift my gaze, and lowered my head.

What— am I going to do?

I don’t know. Because there’s nothing more that I can help with. If there’s something that I could help with, I should’ve done it earlier. Before Ayaka committed suicide, before Toshi’s disappearance.

The only thing that I could do for Ayaka right now, is to find out the reason for her suicide, and to search for Toshi, who should know the truth.

“Is that really for Ayaka?”

Tetsu-senpai’s words rang out. My back froze.

For Ayaka?

There’s no such thing, because Ayaka’s heart is already dead. Only her body is left in the ward, while her soul has already disappeared in the winter sky.

That is why—

That’s why, the things that I’m doing is for myself. To relieve my own emotions, because I’m impatient right now.

“That’s great!”

Tetsu-senpai said. I raised my head.

“I’ve said that before, right. I wouldn’t help a person who wouldn’t even ask for himself.”

“Then……” I looked at Tetsu-senpai, Major and Hiro. Their faces were somewhat blurry for some reason. “If I ask for help, you guys would help me?”

“Of course! Vice Admiral Fujishima is also a part of the Japanese army!”

Hiro smiled and said: “How could us NEETs not help each other?”

But can three NEETs and an idiotic high schooler who might become a NEET in the future do anything? What can we do if we just combine four weak hands—

“There’s definitely a way.”

Tetsu-senpai said.

I bit my lips. At this time, at such an important moment, I’m still a useless person who can’t even see them in the eye.

“Please….. help……”

A sound like using a thread to rub my teeth came from my throat.

“Please help me.”

I felt the three of them standing up.

When I raised my head, I saw Tetsu-senpai on the phone. Alice’s voice could be faintly heard on the other side.

‘I don’t think I’ve told you guys to help out.’

“We’ve accepted the request directly from Narumi.”

‘Then there’s no payment this time. If you want payment, just get it from Narumi. You should know that he can’t pay, right!’

“It’s okay, I’ll ask him to waive the money that I owed him from gambling in dices.”

“Eh? Wait a sec, then the only person who benefits from this is Tetsu!”

Hiro interrupted.

“I’ll treat you all to roasted meat.”

“But that isn’t fair, right? A debt of two hundred and seventy thousand exchanged for only roasted meat.”

“The model gun that I wanted is eighty seven thousand.”

“Shut up! Those aren’t important!” Tetsu-senpai said, annoyed. “You too, how long are you going to dawdle there, hurry up and stand up!”

Catching hold of my hand, Tetsu-senpai dragged me up forcibly.

Weakly raising my head, I was shocked when I saw the faces of the three people. In front of the dark ramen shop door, the eyes that exist for the sake of looking at pachinko machines, the eyes that exist for the sake of reading information about the militaries, the eyes that exist for the sake of looking at girls, they were all gleaming together.

Chapter 5

From the next day, my school life became very busy. As soon as school was over, I had to take care of the garden. Sayuri-sensei helped out with that too.

“Before Fujishima-kun entered the Gardening Club, I came over here to help out occasionally too.”

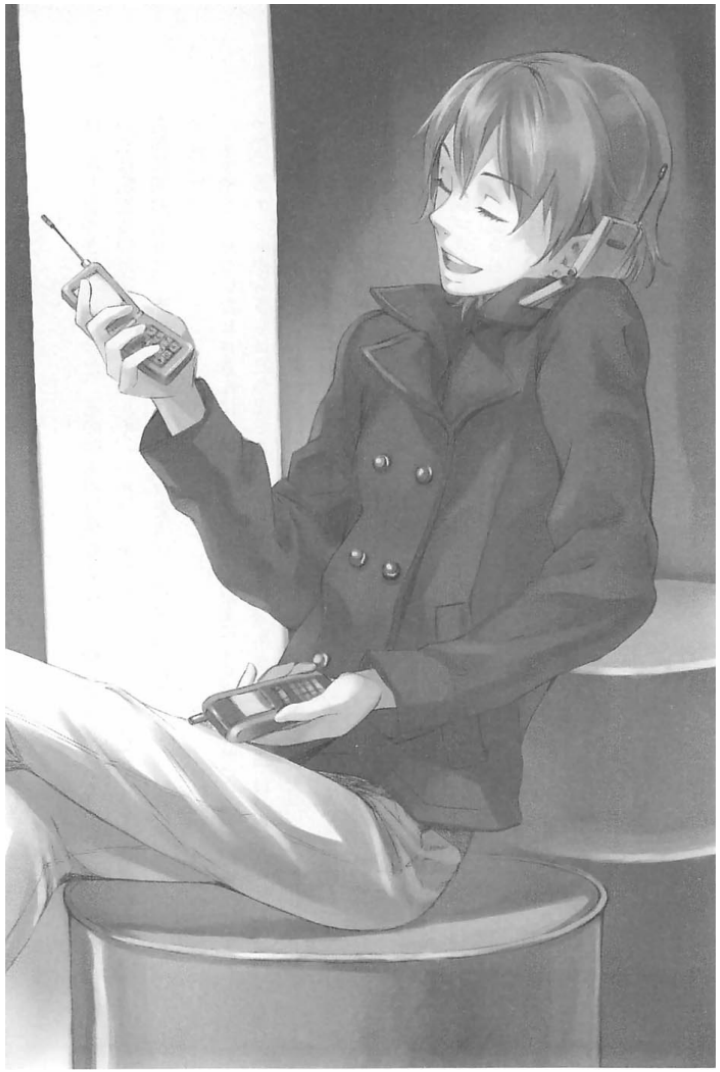
Holding the pot of orchid, she said emotionally.

You could just put the flowers aside in the winter season when the flowers don’t bloom, that was my thoughts before this; but now I know that if we didn’t prepare during the winter, the flowers won’t bloom the next year.

I, myself, don’t know why I’m continuing the Gardening Club activities, but I just felt that if I continued to take care of the plants that Ayaka nurtured, I might be able to know her thoughts better, albeit slightly. Those were my thoughts.

After finishing the club activities, I went through the Shuto Expressway by the river, went past the station and arrived at ‘Hanamaru’. After greeting Min-san, I went to the back of the shop.

The only person who was earlier than me that day was Hiro. He wore a coat with gold buttons sewn onto it with a pair of white jeans. I’ve never seen Hiro wearing the same clothes before, but they’ll probably be gifts from women anyways.



Hiro was sitting on the charred gas tank with a phone clamped between his shoulders and ears, and sending messages with the two phones on his hands. Its just like the acrobatics people do on the streets.

"…… Ah? Is this Mika? It's me, yes yes, I'm Yumi's friend, that's right, Hiro. Nice to meet you. Hahaha, Eh? Really? Asking me out…… Hmm, mmnn, what about this Friday? Are you free?"

If other people who aren't in the know heard him talking, they would probably just think that he's flirting. But his words follow a common pattern, unknowingly changing the subject to the drug. "Ah, I've heard about it. That's right, a pink powder…… Mnn, no, I've never tried it before, but I've heard from my friends that it's great. Who's the one who bought it? Mnn, mnn……" just like that.

I sat on the worn out tires, looking at Hiro, impressed. Hiro turned off the phone on his right and, hung up the phone that he was previously talking on and placed it into his pocket, then smiled at me. After that, his left hand continued it's previous actions, writing something on a piece of paper with a pen.

"It seems like quite a lot of girls have bought it before, but they've bought it from their friends, so it's hard to find the source."

I asked, purely because of interest: "Hiro, how many girls do you know?"

"Mnnn—— I don't know."

Just after Hiro answered me, his phone rang again. Hiro picked up the phone, and started his strawberry-like sweet talking, he really doesn't have any free time. While he was talking on the phone, Hiro's left hand didn't stop at all. The thing that was placed on the table seemed to be a map of the places nearby the station, Marui Supermarket, Balco Supermarket, Tokyu Home Center, First Bookshop…… A red pen was used to draw another and another circle on the streets between the shop names that I've just seen.

"Phew!"

Hiro finally heaved a sigh, placed a row of phones on the table (there's not only three, but also two more in his pockets). He stretched and drank a cup of coffee.

"This one is for female high schoolers, this one is for wives; this one is for attacking the ladies that I want to go out with, this one is for defending against the ladies that I don't like that much……" Hiro explained the usage of his phones one by one. Attack? Defend?

“When compared to a gigolo, you’re more like a hustler……”

I was somewhat defeated by Hiro.

“Do you know what is the difference between a gigolo and a hustler?”

Hiro asked. I tilted my head.

“A gigolo is exclusively locked onto someone, while a hustler must be loved at the same time by three people or above. I’m still a rookie, and dare not say that I’m a hustler.”

“Ah……” What a complicated world. “So, what about a man who is loved by two people at the same time?”

“A person who goes out with two women usually gets a knife in his chest by the women, so they don’t need a name.”

“Oh, I see.” Wait, why am I agreeing??

“But after starting the investigation, it really is muddled up. It’s no small wonder that Yondaime would have trouble with this.”

Hiro turned the map over and said, filling the spaces with names of women and numbers.

“What is that?”

“The price is too cheap, they’ve bought them from people that they know, and also the price doesn’t even have a standard. This drug is too strange, it’s even so common too……”

Ah, so the numbers are prices. I have no idea about prices for drugs, so I’m not sure what they mean by cheap. There are even some zeroes on the map, does that mean that they got them for free?

“What about this side of the map?”

“Ah, that’s the place they bought the drug. A double circle would mean that it’s suspected as the source of the drug.”

I was dumbstruck, staring at the map that was almost completely dyed red. It was not even three days after they vowed to look for Toshi, but Hiro, alone, had already gotten so much information from his five phones.

“Vice Admiral Fujishima is here! Just at the right moment.”

A voice came from behind me. When I turned my head around, Major was standing behind me while carrying an enormous backpack that looked like a small hill.

“Help me to take the backpack down, this thing is broken.” Major said. So, I went over to help me, and spent a lot of effort before we lightly placed the backpack onto the ground.

“I stayed up for two days straight to finish that!”

Major seemed quite delighted when he said that, took out small cameras from his bag and placed them on the wooden stand. The said cameras were just palm-sized black cubes with a round lens on it. There were about twenty identical cameras.

“Major really went all out!”

“I’ve actually finished making the cameras a long time ago, just that installing a verifying software took a long time. There weren’t any missions for pinpointing a certain target until now, so there wasn’t any chance to use it, hehe.”

“So how do you use these cameras?”

“You’ve come just at the right time, Vice Admiral Fujishima. Actually you look very bland, so using you for a test would be perfect.”

I just feel that Major said something rude to me in a straightforward manner. Major borrowed the socket in the kitchen, connected it to the notebook-sized computer, and arranged quite a few cameras in an arc to face my face. Then, he asked Hiro to raise one of them, looking at the computer screen while making adjustments: “Shift it down a little, that’s right, okay, it’s done.” Then Major turned to me and said:

“Walk outside and then walk back again.”

Completely befuddled, I acted in accordance with Major’s word, walked out and walked back to their side. As soon as I entered the shadows of the building, Major’s computer emitted the piercing sound of an alarm. I was startled and took a step back. Hiro was surprised until the camera on his hand nearly fell. Only Major was laughing sneakily while slapping his knees.

“Hmm, its accuracy is indeed higher if you take the photo from the front. Vice Admiral Fujishima, try to walk in with your head lowered this time.”

After that, I followed Major’s instructions, keeping my head lowered, walked horizontally, or turning my head around while walking. I did these odd actions while walking from outside to the kitchen backdoor. Every time I walked in, Major’s computer would sound the alarm. It was not until Min-san scolded: “Shut up, keep quiet! And don’t just use my socket like you own it!” that things came to an end. However, Min-san didn’t really say anything about the camera and the computer.

I finally realized after that…..

“The camera could recognize my face?”

“That’s right. If a photo is taken from a close distance from six sides, the accuracy could be that high. When I went to the research room on summer, the professor was doing an experiment on this, so I just borrowed his idea.”

“Oh, that’s interesting.” Hiro went closer to look at the camera and the monitor. This really isn’t the standard of interest. Having such superb skills, why is he still a NEET?

“You’re going to use it to search for Toshi?”

“We don’t really have that big of a budget, so we have to lock onto some places. This system really uses up a lot of power.”

“Never mind the battery, what about the information about Toshi’s face? You can’t use the system without it, right?”

“The surveillance system in Alice’s room probably has information for about a month.”

Ah, so Major was the one behind the surveillance cameras too? I just feel that things are getting to a larger and larger scale, I could only watch at the side with my mouth open like an idiot.

“Oh yeah, where’s Tetsu?”

Major placed the cameras back into his bag and asked.

“He’s probably at the police station.”

“Ah, if we have the investigation report from the police, we could pinpoint a place to set up the cameras.” Major said as if it wasn’t anything important.

“Tetsu-senpai…… have connections with the police?”

Hiro smiled wryly, is it because my surprised expression is that funny?

“Before he started boxing, he was always taken care by the police. I remember that it was the youth counselors who brought him to the boxing center while weeping and asked them to take care of him. After he started boxing, he stopped getting into fights.”

In the end, he became a pachinko gambler right now— that was Hiro’s conclusion. I’ve never heard about Tetsu-senpai’s past, but he couldn’t just get information from the police, could he……

Right when I was thinking about that, Tetsu-senpai appeared at the ramen shop. It was about seven at night. He took out a notebook from his T-shirt, then put it in front of Major and Hiro with a thunk.

“Tetsu, you reek of smoke.”

“It can’t be helped, the only place where the smell of cigarette is stronger than the pachinko shop is the police station. And the smell of smoke isn’t the main point. I tidied up the map a bit, so take out yours for a look.”

Major skimmed through the notes while saying: “There’s really not much progress for the police’s investigation.” Looking from the side, the notebook was scrawled full of words written with a pencil, probably Tetsu-senpai’s notes? He really did get news from the police?

The three surrounded the old wooden stand and started to talk quietly. Hiro added the information from the police onto the map full of red marks.

There’s really no room for me to take part in this anymore.

When they were having a discussion over there, I went into the ramen shop and helped to wash the dishes. Min-san didn’t ask me for help, it’s just that I just couldn’t stay at the backdoor of the kitchen anymore, so I willingly offered to help.

“— wouldn’t it be better if we handed the information to Yondaime too?”

“I don’t want to borrow the strength of his gang.”

“But progress will be faster if we share information.”

“I’ll take a copy of this over, and will go to the hotel as well. I have something to ask some of the girls directly.”

“Tetsu, so could you help me to set the surveillance cameras?”

“Okay.”

When I was eavesdropping in the kitchen, the three finished their discussion and left. The customers came in like they were taking turns to eat. In the steam of the bustling shop, I felt as if I’ve been forgotten by everyone.

Probably because of my dejected expression, Min-san patted me on the shoulders.

“…… the three…… seems very good at this.”

“Oh yes— they’ve done these kind of things from before this.

Though they're just helping Alice, I really think that they should just go to work if they can do things to this extent."

I feel so too.

*

"It's because we couldn't do it that we became NEETs!"

Alice said jubilantly. As usual, the air conditioning in room 308 is going strong. The pajamas-clad girl was in a good mood that day, and even ate the soy sauce ramen with some noodles in it without even much grumbling.

"Most of the people in this world don't understand NEETS. The qualities of humans are not determined by their quantity, but their direction. Although people say something like people have their own strengths, their own ambitions, and life has limitless possibilities, they are still limited by the one dimensional world during actual evaluation."

"…… Do you mean even Min-san can't understand?"

"Master is different, because she won't say all those rubbish. The things that she taught us were after understanding all our fates, her innocent and true considerations. But people like Master is a minority, most people don't really understand what 'infinite possibilities mean. Because they couldn't imagine what's behind their ships, so some of them vigorously rowed against the flow. Isn't that right? That's because the direction that they're going forward is directly opposite to us."

Mnn…… That might be right……

"If I gave people like you a direction, you'll turn out like that automatically. Tetsu, Major and Hiro might truly want to save Toshi, seeing as they've been partners who had been playing games of dice together. Even so, they just wanted to pretend that they're cool, so they can't take part actively. They were actually waiting for

your help.”

I recalled the burning passion in their eyes— maybe it was all like Alice have said.

“Although I speak of this like it’s none of my business, actually I’m also a person who likes to hide my true thoughts. The only worrying thing for NEETs is only one— not knowing what to do.”

Alice put down the bowl, holding her chopsticks weakly while spacing out with lonely eyes.

“After the big flood, God used four bases to engrave his best wishes and absolute orders for all living creatures, have you heard about it? ‘You must live strong and breed to fill up the whole world.’ But — He forgot to write it on us.”

Her words sounded just like a joke, but seeing Alice smiling as if she finally saw the beaming face of the sun after floating in the sea for three days while clutching on a plank, I couldn’t laugh at all.

“…… but, you’re the same right?”

Alice said. She placed the bowl on her bent knees, gazing at me with white fumes of the hot soup swirling between us.

“Not knowing what to do, which is why you want to know something that’s useless even if you know, feeling very, very anxious, so anxious that you can’t stand it.”

The truth is as Alice have said, so I didn’t answer her.

“Why? Why is it that we can only see what we have lost?”

Alice stopped talking then. She again picked up the chopsticks, temporarily focusing on her bowl. The room was filled only with the sound of Alice slurping her noodles, chewing on onions and the sound of a large number of cooling fans.

When I stood up, took out a can of Dr. Pepper and placed it in front of Alice, she had just finished eating her last mouthful of noodles.

“You’re only clever when it comes to these things.”

Alice laughed while opening the can, while I squatted down at a corner of the bed, hugging my knees.

“I don’t have any other talents anyways, so I’ll just get cans of Dr. Pepper for you forever.”

The words that I said only to ridicule myself felt as if they would become real after I said it. That made me feel even more hurt.

“Narumi…..”

I raised my head because of Alice’s call.

` Alice was waving to me…… Eh? What is it? Does she want me to go there? Feeling suspicious, I slowly edged there while kneeling.

“Good boy.”

Alice patted my head.

“What are you……” What are you doing? I couldn’t help but take a step back.

“That’s the first time I got that reaction. Hiro was delighted,while Yondaime showed an annoyed expression but didn’t run away.”

“No…… I think it’s better if you don’t do these kind of things to guys.”

“Why?”

Asking me why, I couldn’t answer.

“Didn’t you say that you’re useless? Didn’t you even listen to what I’ve said just now? It’s so rare that I’m telling you meaningful things like people must have their own talents, humans have limitless possibilities and so on, too.”

…… Didn’t you just say that those are meaningless statements?

“But no matter what you do, the person who will praise you is not

here anymore."

Alice's gentle voice made my whole body freeze.

On the wall beside the entrance, I slowly slid down to the floor.

"Even if you have a direction— there's nothing at all in the direction that you're going. The only destination is the cemetery. So at least let me touch your head as a consolation."

Alice walked down from the bed and came closer to me. She bent down slightly her eyes at the same level of me, who's sitting down on the floor, then again used her chilly hands to rub my hair.

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There weren't any news on the next few days.

Although I went to the 'Hanamaru Ramen Shop' every day after school, I didn't do anything special. Hiro went to the hotel every day. Major claimed the gas tank in front of the stairs as his own, facing his notebook-sized computer with a vicious expression on his face, causing people to stay away from him.

I originally wanted to ask Min-san to let me give her a hand, but she seemed to have noticed my thoughts and said with a stiff expression:

"No, thanks……. You just hurry up and find a wife that's really good at doing housework, and steer clear of the kitchen forever."

Although her words were harsh, I couldn't say anything to rebuke her. That's because I created a new record that even Ayaka couldn't achieve— breaking five bowls in just two hours. Squatting down on the wet soil, I almost wept because of my own uselessness.

Right when January was about to end, a big case occurred. I saw it on the television when I was about to go to school. The middle-aged male broadcaster suppressed his feelings with skill, and only showed about a centimeter of regret on his face while broadcasting.

"…… mass poisoning incident has occurred. On about eleven at night, six people suddenly fainted at a night club that opened until late night……"

The shop was just beside Balco Supermarket, a famous club that even I've heard of. Of course, the broadcaster didn't say that the club was in any way related to the drugs.

But at about eight that night, Tetsu-senpai who didn't appear at the 'Hanamaru Ramen Shop' for quite a long time came in and said casually: "The mass poisoning incident is related to Fix. Ah….. Yeah, that's what I heard from the police." Is it okay for the police in this area to do this? Revealing information to a nineteen year old pachinko gambler, did they tell him that just because he's Tetsu-senpai?

"Any news from Yondaime?"

"There's probably more people than the police working on this. As it's a human sea attack, we'll probably find something soon…… I gave them the information that I've tidied up. But the pills are already so widespread, why aren't there any clues?"

"Erm……"

I politely interrupted. Tetsu-senpai and Major turned around to face me at the same time, making me feel somewhat nervous.

"…… if we're using a human sea tactic, can I help out?"

Senpai cocked his head.

"How about you ask Yondaime about that? Although I think you'll be refused."

"Eh? Why?"

"That guy seems to hate you a lot, even though you've met for only two or three times."

"Thi- this……"

“No matter how Yondaime sees you, you can’t take part because you’re a high schooler. Although they are yakuzas, they’re actually quite decent. Those who are schooling can’t join them, their enemies would be enemies forever.”

I see, it’s because I’m not even a NEET. Facing me, who was looking downcast, Tetsu-senpai showed a mystified expression.

“What is it? Just having another person to help wouldn’t improve things, and you’re the customer, so you don’t have to do anything and just wait for the results.”

It’s not that problem. Then what’s the difference with this and letting Alice handle all of it, and just be in charge of getting Dr. Pepper? There’s no difference asking for help from anyone, but I must depend on myself to find out the reason for Ayaka’s suicide. I could only tell myself repeatedly that I must find out the truth by myself, using the reason of doing something to help out Ayaka so that the emptiness in my heart could be filled.

Even though I knew that it couldn’t be filled.

It’s impossible to fill it, because Ayaka would not smile or speak to me anymore. Because I’m not doing anything by Ayaka’s request, she didn’t say anything— didn’t say anything to me, and tried to commit suicide.

To her, our friendship is just to this extent, huh?

Now, it is already too late.

The ringtone of ‘Colorado Bulldog’ rang as usual, stirring me from my indecisive emotions. Tetsu-senpai and Hiro stood up, but the only phone that was ringing was Major’s.

‘It’s me, did you bring the recorder today?’

Recorder?

“Yes, but what do you want to do with it?”

After that, Alice and Major had a conversation on the phone for

awhile. After they hung up, Major looked at us and said:

“It seems that they’ve found the person who stabbed people in Yondaime’s shop. He was caught while drinking in a shop, and caused some trouble by taking out a knife.”

I was taken aback and stood up. Now that we’ve found one of the drug dealers, we can start to take action.

Tetsu-senpai said: “Is that guy an idiot? At least get it clear that he’s on the turf of Hirasaka-gumi.”

“And he went into the shop when Tetsu and Hiro was doing investigations there, is this what they call finding something through sheer luck after looking for it for a long time (Z: It’s actually an idiom, can’t find any other substitutes)?”

“So what did Alice say?”

“She wanted to hear the contents of the interrogation, so she asked me to record it.”

“Oh, that’s why she asked you if you have a recorder on you. But Yondaime probably started to beat him up, right?”

“I heard that Yondaime isn’t there yet, so she wanted me to hurry there.”

“If you don’t hurry, the guy would be get beaten up into a pulp. Yondaime is merciless towards people who make a move on his partners.”

My back felt cold after hearing Tetsu-senpai’s words.

“I walked here today, because I came here directly from Akihabara…”

“Narumi, you rode a bike here, right? Take me there.”

Eh?

“You want to help Yondaime, right? It’s probably okay if you just

tell him."

"But……"

"Stop that nonsense and go! You're not alright staying here anyways, are you?"

Indeed, that is so. Why is Tetsu-senpai so clear about my thoughts? Or is my crestfallen expression that easy to read?

"Let's go! Vice Admiral Fujishima, ride like the wind!"

Major started to hit my bottom with his bag energetically.

*

Club Haploid Heart was located at a basement of a small building at the Snack Street behind Tokyu Shopping Mall. Yellow neon signs were hung on the cramped stairway leading to the basement, and the name of the shop was written in English cursive. I found a sticker with a swallowtail butterfly emblem on it stuck onto the lower right corner of the signboard. It seems that the shop was a franchising store. Is this shop really operated by Hirasaka-gumi? I always thought that Hirasaka-gumi was just a fake yakuza gang that was formed from NEETs, this is really getting more and more confusing. To be honest, I thought that Hirasaka-gumi was a motorbike gang until last month.

"Are you going to wait outside?"

"Well, I'm here anyways, there's no reason for me to just wait outside."

As it's my first time entering a club, I was quite nervous. Two young men squatting down at the corner, playing games on their phones, turned around to stare at Major and I, as though they were looking at ostriches that escaped from the zoo.

Walking to the end of the stairway, we opened the massive doors,

seeing the walls and floor of the short passageway that were painted gold A counter was at the left, while there's a door deeper in the room. The room looked just like a pressurized cabin in sci-fi movies. The high-pitched part of a dance song could be heard in here.

"High schoolers are prohibited from entering the shop."

Wearing a black wired sweater, the male supervisor that looked somewhat like a woman said to us. He directly glared at me, then shifted his gaze to Major, who was wearing a military uniform, completely failing to fit in with the night club. At that moment, I just realized that I was still wearing my school uniform as I went directly to the ramen shop after school.

"We're not customers, Souchiro asked us to come."

Major lied indifferently.

"Ah, Sou-san asked you to come, did he?"

"There's a problem right now, so we—"

"And when did I ask you to come again?"

Major jumped about two meters because of the sharp voice. Turning around to look at the entrance that we've just came in from, Yondaime, who was wearing a crimson coat, walked towards us against the light followed by Rocky and Pole.

"Sou-san, thanks for your hard work."

The guy(woman?) behind the counter said in a high-pitched voice. I sneaked a peek at him, and found that his whole face was red because of nervousness, and only his eyes were glittering.

"Aniki, thanks for your hard work!"

Rocky and Pole greeted me in a chorus with their heads lowered. Major stared at me with an astonished expression on his face. I, myself, don't know how it turned out like this either!

“What are you doing here? Did Alice say something unnecessary again?”

“She just wants to know the contents of the interrogation.”

Major shrugged, and showed Yondaime the palm-sized recorder. Yondaime made a ‘tut’ sound.

“And why is the Gardening Club kid here, too?”

“Vice Admiral Fujishima is Alice’s assistant.”

“Ah— enough, I get it. It’s so troublesome.” Yondaime pushed Major and I away and said to the counter: “Sorry for troubling you, the person that I’m looking for is inside, right?”

When the door inside opened, Yondaime turned his head around and said to me:

“Gardening Club kid, at least take off your coat and your tie!”

It was like the shop was in alternate dimension. A slow song was being played on the dance floor. An eerie orange color that appeared only at dawn in the black seas surfaced in the middle of the dance floor; the strangely dressed DJ wore four different colored shirts, and was playing the six beat music that made people feel anxious. In the darkness, the crowd shook their head with the beat, jewellery and glasses glittering due to the dim reflected light.

With Yondaime in the lead, followed by Rocky, Pole, me, and lastly Major, the peculiar group walked in a line further into the shop, pushing away the other people in the crowd.

“Ah! Sou-san!”

“Sou-san, good to see you again! It’s rare that you would appear at this time.”

A row of office ladies who finished work surrounded Yondaime.

“So sorry, but I’m busy right now. I’ll come find you later.”

“Ehhhhhh—”

“It was so scary just now! A crazy fellow took a knife and went on a rampage, it was so terrifying.”

“Good thing the show didn’t just stop because of this. The DJ today is great, Sou-san should listen together!”

Rocky opened his mouth, showing his teeth to scare them away, while Major and I slipped through the gap. The suspicious gazes of the girls are really painful. After that, Yondaime had to deal with the girls who rushed over when they saw him every five meters. Finally, we reached an inconspicuous door in the shadows of the spiral staircase, and the words ‘Staff Only’ were written on it.

At the moment the door was opened, the odd sound made by a man rang in the corridors. I couldn’t tell if it was a wail of distress or his laughter. I suddenly felt a chill on my back.

Metal racks, wooden boxes, stacked round stools, the cement wall that was pasted full of faded Pepsi Cola posters, there was an ancient air to the room. The wide warehouse might be shared, because quite a few doors could be seen on our way here.

“Thanks for your hard work!”

“Thanks for your hard work!”

A few men wearing black T-shirts greeted Yondaime.

“Aniki is here too?”

Even I, who was hiding behind Rocky, was found immediately.

There was a tied up man lying on the floor at a corner of the warehouse. He wore a dark green hoodie with a slightly dirty pants; His eyes that looked like a crow searching for trash in a junkyard were wandering under his unruly hair. His skin and lips were parched, so his age couldn’t be estimated, but he should be quite young.

“He had quite a lot of the pills on him.”

One of the lackeys handed a plastic bag to Yondaime. They were pills placed into different packets. They were much redder than what I first saw, but the marking of the wings and the two letters—A.F, I still have an impression on them.

“The amount that they’re selling is increasing lately.”

“It might be a stock-clearing sale.”

“Oh, oh, oh…….”

The man lying on the floor twisted his body while trying to get a hold on Yondaime’s leg. The black shirted guys kicked the man in the stomach.

Yondaime took off his coat and handed it to Pole, who was behind him. He squatted down, caught hold of the man’s unruly hair and turned the man’s face towards his own shoulders.

“You recognize this emblem, right? You’re the one who stabbed one of us, right?”

The man didn’t answer, but just foamed in the mouth. I was overwhelmed by Yondaime’s imposing aura, and could not even make a sound. I suddenly felt that the area was giving out a thoughtful air.

“How do you meet the people who made Fix? Where are they?”

There were Yondime’s low voice, and a high-pitched voice that almost buried Yondaime’s voice.

“Don’t even need to contact them, they are there, only we can see them. The top of their head is shining, have wings, can hear the song. We can hear…… and can se, only we can see.”

“Stop that nonsense!”

One of the lackeys kicked the man’s back, causing the man to cough violently, but he didn’t stop talking.

“The wings that you couldn’t see, but we can see. In the crowd, the

song guides us. You can't hear it, right? Scum like you could never hear it. Dylan, Bob Dylan's 'Knockin' on Heaven's Door' is sung, and the angels will correct us."

Angel Fix will not look down on anyone, that's what Toshi said. I couldn't help but push away the broad back of one of the lackeys and ran towards the man. As soon as my face got close to him, I smelled the odor of blood that he coughed out.

"Do you know Shinozaki? It's this person, this guy."

I took out a copy of the wanted poster with the photos of the six people on it, showed it to him and pointed at the bottom right corner.

"Have you seen this guy?"

"Aniki, it's dangerous to get close. Please step aside."

The black shirted man caught hold of my collar and pulled me away. The man didn't look at the poster or at me, but continued with his weak voice that sounded as if he squeezed them out:

"You who cannot see the angels or hear the song should just die. Kill you, I want to kill you, I'm very gentle, so I just stabbed that guy in the stomach, the blood is warm……"

Veins showed on the lackey's forehead, and he raised his hand.

With a 'thwack', his hand was stopped.

"…… Sou-san!"

Yondaime slowly put down the hand of his follower.

"Undo the rope on him."

"We don't know what he's going to do!"

"Stop making a fuss. This type of scum needs a trial too."

Trial?

After the man was free, he stood up stiffly like a robot. Yondaime took out the large saber searched from the man, pulled out the scabbard and looked at the blade.

“Hey! The trials of Hirasaka-gumi have been suggested by a certain idiot following the customs of medieval Europe. They are also known as God’s Judgment; because God will let the right party win.”

The man picked up the knife that was thrown to his side like a hungry wolf preying on sheep. I nearly cried out loud.

“Aniki, please go out.”

A few black shirted men formed a wall with their back, leading Major and I out of the warehouse.

“That’s really dangerous! K- Knives……”

“Vice Admiral Fujishima, Yondaime will definitely be okay.”

At the instant when Major murmured that, the drug addict kicked the wall and leapt to his front. It was like we could hear the sounds of the blade slicing the air. But Yondaime couldn’t be seen anymore, so we didn’t know how he moved. Yondaime stood in front of the drug addict leaping towards him, and he hit the man in the back of his head. When the man collapsed, the sound of his teeth cracking echoed in the room.

A black stain spread from the head of the collapsed man.

“…… Thanks for your hard work.”

“Thanks for your hard work.”

The members of Hirasaka-gumi solemnly bowed. Yondaime kicked over the motionless man, and blood could be seen on the man’s face.

“Gardening Club kid, get out of here. What goes on next isn’t something that a kid like you can see.”

“But……”

“Aniki, sorry for this.”

Before I could protest, two lackeys pushed me out to the corridor. At the instant when the doors were closed, I saw Major who was starting the recorder, and the eyes of Yondaime who caught hold of the man’s hair.

I was left alone in the cold corridor that was illuminated by flashing neon lights.

Wails of agony came from behind the door, and they lingered in my mind for a long, long time.

*

Squatting down on the corridors with my face buried in my hands, I raised my head when I heard the sound of the door opening.

Yondaime walked out behind Major. I realized that there were blood on his fists.

“…… How’s that guy?”

“He’s just blabbering some things that people couldn’t understand, so I haven’t killed him yet. There are still some things that I have to ask him.”

Haven’t? Haven’t killed him yet?

What if he doesn’t have any information on him?

“Major, take this bag of pills to Alice.”

“The contents changed?”

“That’s possible. The people who are hospitalized increased lately. Just a small amount of it could make them very high, causing the idiotic kids to be so happy. It seems that a lot of other chemicals

have been added.”

Other chemicals have been added. At this moment, I realized with a shock that it’s because of the decrease in raw material.

Because of Ayaka’s absence.

Major took the plastic bag from Yondaime and placed it into my hands.

“Vice Admiral Fujishima, help me take the pills to Alice. I need to go home for awhile.”

“Oi! Don’t ask a high schooler to send this type of thing!”

Major turned to Yondaime and shrugged.

“It’s okay if it’s Vice Admiral Fujishima! His face and his appearance is bland to the extreme, even if a terrorist attack happened at the Imperial Palace, he could still go where he wants in the Chiyoda area without even being questioned.”

Mind your own business.

Yondaime made a ‘tut’ noise and said: “Why aren’t you sending it there?”

“Because I have to go edit the audio! How could you let Alice hear the sounds of Yondaime dislocating the man’s arms, breaking his teeth and trampling on his hands!”

“You really are an annoying guy.”

“Thank you for the compliment.”

Pole stuck his head out of the warehouse.

“Sou-san, we’ve finished bandaging his wounds. Should we bring him to the office?”

“I’ll hand it to you.”

As Yondaime was about to walk further into the corridors,

“Erm—”

Yondaime is always so sensitive to my voice, like he felt that I was an irritating bug that stopped on his neck.

My voice disappeared because of the glare by the wolf, and made me unsure of what to say next. Indeed, I came here to help find Toshi, but the atmosphere at that moment made me unable to say that.

This is really not a world that I could live in.

*

On the way back to the ramen shop from the night club, my phone vibrated suddenly when I was riding on the trails beside the park. I stopped, looked at the name shown on the liquid plasma screen, and nearly cried out loud.

Shinozaki Ayaka.

With a ‘Ker-plunk’, pain came from my elbow and kneecaps. My bike fell onto the ground, while I, too, was sprawled on the road. Some drunk office workers scolded me whehn passing by, but my eyes were still glued to my tightly held phone. Ayaka, it’s Ayaka! How could that be? Why was Ayaka calling me?

Lying on the asphalt road, I picked up the phone with trembling hands.

“…… Hello?”

‘…… Hmm? Mnn? Oh, oho~ this number really is yours, ah, hahaha!’

A familiar voice came from the phone, the loud but somewhat hourse voice of a man.

“— Toshi?”

‘ There’s only your number and the ramen shop’s in Ayaka’s phone,

ahaha, hahahaha!”

Toshi’s eerily piercing laughter is obviously the ones after he took the drug. Why would Toshi have Ayaka’s phone? The thought that Ayaka might have saw Toshi before she tried to commit suicide completely missed my mind.

“Where….. are you right now——”

‘There’s wanted posters everywhere, even Hakamizaka’s face has been found out. Haha, I’ve really underestimated Alice, she’s truly a freak.”

“What did you do to Ayaka?”

‘Why, why did it turn out like this……’ Toshi’s voice sounded somewhat listless.

‘About Ayaka, I’m also…… If I, I……”

Sniffles came from the other side of the phone. Toshi was crying, he just couldn’t hear my words.

‘We can’t run away anymore……’

Toshi’s voice gradually became smaller.

“Hurry up and say where you are!” I shouted, as if I’m hammering him. Toshi started to mutter:

‘…… hey……. Sa…… save…….. Me……”

“Are you joking! You—”

The noise of something suddenly came from the other side of the phone, interrupting my words. A man roaring: ‘Idiot, who are you talking to!’ and then a noise like a cabinet keeping cutlery was overturned sounded.

When I shifted the phone away from my ears due to the noise, a familiar voice of a man came from the phone:

‘…… So you’re Alice, huh?’

A husky voice.

“Who are you—?”

I’ve already noticed before I asked him who he was, this is the voice of the man who stood beside me at the zebra crossings the last day I met Toshi.

“Are you— Hakamizaka? Where are you? What did you do to Toshi!”

‘You’re not Alice? Isn’t the detective looking for me? Do you know Alice?’

“Answer me! Why did you take Toshi away?”

I stood up, going forward while clutching at my bike with one hand, as though I’m clenching desperately at the neck of the man at the other side of the phone.

‘Oh, you’re the high schooler who was chasing Shinozaki that time.’

The man was laughing. Hakamizaka was laughing at me through Ayaka’s phone. Anger that flowed in through my ears were like boiling blood, suppressing my breathing.

‘Tell the detective, find me if she’s really that good. Come catch me. If even you guys found me, my experiment would be a success.’

“You……What are you, trying to do?”

‘Telling you would just be a waste of time. You don’t have a clue, so you won’t be able to come, I understood that when I saw you. But some people can, and many other people can too. I will correct those people. Even if there’s only one, I will bring them to heaven.’

Just when Hakamizaka’s voice raised all of a sudden, the phone was hung up.

I redialed Ayaka’s phone number for a lot of times, almost to the

extent of breaking my thumb. But I couldn't reach the number. The cold tone of the voice mail said that there's no signal or the phone is off.

I got onto my bike and pedaled furiously. While I was dashing on the road, I might have shouted some incomprehensible words.

*

"Alice!"

I rushed inside the room like I was going to tear down the door of room 308, causing Tetsu-senpai, who was yawning in front of the bed, to jump in surprise. Sitting opposite to him, Alice's hair flew up.

"Narumi, what's with you? You even forgot to ring the doorbell—"

"Toshi just called me. He's carrying Ayaka's phone right now, and is with Hakamizaka!"

Alice and I looked at each other, and Alice understood my meaning in a flash. Alice closed her mouth, turning again to the keyboard and hammered it in a surprisingly majestic manner while calling people at the same time.

Using a satellite to detect the weak electromagnetic waves from a phone and check one's location originally requires the permission of the opposing party, but Alice is a cracker who could even find out the phone log of their phones.

"Narumi, calm down and sit down."

Tetsu-senpai forced me to sit down beside the fridge, as if he was going to flatten my head. My head hurts, breathing felt difficult; My body below my neck felt freezing cold, but my face was burning hot. I saw stars, and my lips were trembling uncontrollably.

"Breathe slowly, you're over-breathing. Listen…… One, two three."

Tetsu-senpai's large hand slowly massaged my back. I felt air

blocking my windpipe like a fist, but I still forced myself to coordinate my breathing with Tetsu-senpai's beats. My chest that felt as if it was tied up at first, slowly felt more comfortable.

"It's no good, the phone isn't turned on."

After about fifteen minutes, Alice finally turned her head around and said. I leaned against the side of the fridge, exhausted. My breathing was still very rapid, so I drank a mouthful of the sports drink that Tetsu-senpai bought me.

"Narumi, are you okay?"

"Urgh….."

I wanted to answer 'Yeah' but couldn't talk properly. Tetsu-senpai sat at the end of the bed.

"Darn, I've forgotten that there's still the trail of Ayaka's phone."

"I forgot about it too. If only I've noticed earlier……"

Alice's face twisted because of hate, her thumb massaging her lower lip.

"But according to the phone log, they're still in the area."

"They've probably ran away by now, haven't they?"

"God knows. The facilities for manufacturing drugs are probably on this street, which is why they're in this area. Leaving behind all of their stuff and running away requires comprehension…… Narumi, what did Toshi say to you?"

I blankly stared at Alice who was asking me a question, unable to comprehend at that moment that she was asking me.

Toshi. What did Toshi say in the phone again? He said that there's wanted posters everywhere and they can't run away now. And then, and then—

"…… He asked us to save him."

Although there were only a small hint of a change in Tetsu-senpai's expression, I still noticed it.

"Really?"

I nodded.

At the last moment, Toshi did say: 'Save me.'

"Alice, I got it."

Because of my words, the black hair swayed.

"You said that you didn't understand why Toshi let me see the drugs, right?"

"Yeah……"

"Toshi didn't come to borrow money from Ayaka that day, and he wasn't here to spy on your job, he's actually……"

Although there aren't any concrete evidence, I still know it.

"He's actually here to ask for help, but he just couldn't say it out loud, but hoped that someone, no matter anyone, would realize his plea for help, and then, and then……"

Did Toshi ask for help from Hakamizaka? Thus, the man used the pink pills to take the place of a helping hand?

Why is he so idiotic? Why didn't he just say so in the first place? Why now? " It's already too late! Idiot! He should say so earlier! Why didn't he say so before Ayaka commited suicide? Why did she try to commit suicide without even saying a word? Why? Why……"

I was truly angry at that moment, angry at Ayaka, and also Toshi. The two matters muddled into one in my brain, turned into words and spilled out from my mouth. But I couldn't stop. You want us to save you only now? It's all because of you that Ayaka fell into a coma. What a joke! Stop joking!

I supported my hands on the cold floor, and started to bellow as

though I was throwing up.

After I finished shouting wordlessly until I could not say anything anymore, the silence that was flattening us gradually lifted.

In the frozen room, the first person to take action was Tetsu-senpai. He stood up from the bed and walked towards the entrance.

“So you’re finally serious?”

Alice asked with a steady voice. Senpai placed his hand on the handle, saying without even turning his head back:

“Idiot, I’m always that serious, it’s just that I’m not in a rush.”

“Oh really? If you don’t hurry up, Toshi would either be swallowed up by the angels or slaughtered by Yondaime.”

“I know.”

The sound of the closing door shook me to the core.

It was only at these moments that Alice didn’t say anything, and even took out a can of Dr. Pepper from her fridge herself. Alice squatted down by my side. Although our arms were only separated by a layer of clothing, our body temperatures were very far.

*

The following day, after class finished.

I squatted down alone in a corner of the school garden and dug while thinking that I’m never going to Hanamaru Ramen Shop ever again. It was not only because I have nothing to do there, it was also because my very existence was getting in everybody’s ways.

Even if I don’t know anything, I still want to find something that only I could do. Even strolling in the streets the whole day while holding a poster would be fine. Just waiting on a gas tank just made me feel like I’m going to be flattened.

Something that I can do.

Something that only I can do.

Is there such a thing?

When using the spade to turn over the decaying roots, the thing in my pocket fell onto the soil.

“Ah……”

It was a small plastic bag. There were four red pills in it, and on them were engraved the wings of an angel.

It was the Angel Fix that Yondaime gave me yesterday. That’s right, I originally went back to the ramen shop to give the pills to Alice. I had actually forgotten all about it.

I lifted up the bag and looked at it through the weak rays of the winter sun.

The members of the baseball club ran through the courtyard, and two girls from the tennis club passed by them. Probably nobody would even think that I’m holding a drug that’s named an angel, right? Because of these tiny pills, quite a few people have already died.

It’s because of them that Ayaka fell into a coma.

Anger surged in my heart all of a sudden. I held the plastic bag tightly, used the spade to stab the soil forcibly, trying to restrain myself. It’s just a drug. A round object that got its contents from the fruits of some strange poppy flowers. Even if I tore them apart, ground them into powder and burn them into ashes, Ayaka wouldn’t come back.

Closing my eyes, I slowly breathed out.

Then, I lifted the plastic bag to eye level and again said to myself, this is just a drug.

“……. Hmm?”

I had a feeling that something was not right.

I didn't understand the reason. Raising the plastic bag, I turned its contents over again and again, feeling that something was…… off, but I didn't know what was wrong with it.

"FU- JI- SHI- MA- KUN!"

The voice of a girl interrupted my train of thought. I hastily stuffed the pills back into my pocket. Sayuri-sensei ran over to me from the school building wearing pure white clothing and a mini skirt.

"I'm sorry, can you please move the pots to another side?"

Sensei pointed at the flowerpot that haven't bloomed yet.

"Is there…… anything wrong?"

My answering voice sounded somewhat unnatural.

"As the rooftop is locked now, the graduation photo is going to be taken at the courtyard. We must find some space for that."

Ahhhh…… So that's why.

"So am I bothering them then?"

Sayuri-sensei smiled wryly.

"Yeah, we can't go through the activities of the Gardening Club today."

Anyways, I stood up. It was like someone told me, I had to walk somewhere, and not squat down and think of meaningless things. I sighed, stood up and patted away the soil on my knees. Because of Sayuri-sensei's help, we moved all the plants to the entrance in five minutes.

*

In the end, I still went to the ramen shop. I couldn't just disappear without even handing Alice the stuff.

I originally planned to hand the pills to anyone and then walk away, but there's not even a person at the kitchen backdoor. Am I too early? But I didn't want to hand it directly to Alice. She would probably see through my thoughts as soon as she saw my face, and then give some hurtful comments.

Thinking that I had no choice, I could only wait on the gas tank for everyone to arrive. Min-san who was busy preparing soup said: "They've already gathered at the office."

They?

As soon as I opened the door to the NEET Detective Agency, room 308, I heard the familiar voices of the guys from the inside of the office.

"…… only we could find them, there are glowing wings on the angel's head, and heard a song, we could hear, and could see, only us……"

Hiro and Tetsu-senpai sat at two sides of the bed while Major was sitting opposite to Alice. A large amount of plastic bags containing pink pills were stacked on the blankets. The voice came from Major's recorder, which is the voice of the drug dealer we caught at Club Haploid Heart.

Tetsu-senpai muttered: "They're saying the same thing as the guys caught by the police."

"Because they have shining wings on their head, and Bob Dylan's song so they could find it immediately…… (Sigh). If there's really such an obvious person, Hirasaka-gumi would find them long ago."

Alice shook her head and turned off the recorder.

"Narumi, what are you spacing off at the entrance for? We're having a meeting right now, so hurry up and close the door, then get me a can of Dr. Pepper."

"Ah…… Mnn."

A meeting? I'm extremely getting in their way, so I'd better get out

quickly.

I handed the Dr. Pepper and the Angel Fix to Alice together.

“Hmm? Ahhh, it’s the thing that Yondaime gave you yesterday. You just keep forgetting important things easily.”

“Mnn….. Sorry. I’ll just go home then.”

When I was about to walk out of the room, Major grabbed my coat.

“Vice Admiral Fujishima, where are you going? We’re having a tactical meeting right now!”

“Well, it’s just that…… I’m getting in the way, right?”

“Stop babbling and sit down. You’re my assistant, right? If you went home, who’ll get me my second can of Dr. Pepper after I finished my first one?”

Alice spoke to me with an arrogant air as usual. Vortexes of questions appeared in my mind, but in the end I just bit my lower lip, saying nothing and sat down beside Major, who offered me a seat. It’s too crowded. This really isn’t a room for the meeting of five people.

Even though I would only get in the way, I might think of something after listening to the meeting. I changed my mind, and started to think of anything that I could do to help.

“The said wings and song might just be a code or something.”

Hiro said while flipping through the information.

“The bones in his hands were fractured by Yondaime, is it possible for him to continue having that illusion? And the five people who were arrested said the same thing!”

“There’s no common point for the drug dealers…… And they’re not even drug dealers, but just people who bought them in pill shape, the ones we call the first customers.”

“Someone even got them for free, meaning that the organization is not after profits, but did this for an experiment.”

“Then the drug addicts gather at points where there are shining wings on the people’s heads and the music. Is it only them who could differentiate the markings? Is this a joke?”

I could understand what everyone said for now. We still couldn’t find the person who directly took part in manufacturing. The man who was almost beaten to death by Yondaime some time ago bought a pile of drugs and sold them everywhere, but was clueless about things concerning the organization.

Is there such a thing? If the police or Hirasaka-gumi tried to buy the pills, they should probably find out about it immediately.

“I’ve tracked the girls who bought the drug too, but couldn’t find people of the organization.”

“There should be some kind of code. They’re having regular supplies too, and yet the police in plain clothes couldn’t find them.”

“So the problem is with the wings and the song.”

“I really have no idea what that means.”

While listening to Hiro, Major and Tetsu-senpai’s discussion, I observed the large amount of Angel Fix lying beside Alice’s foot. Again, I had that strange feeling that I had when I was at the school garden. What on Earth is it? What is the thing that keeps attracting me to them?

I subconsciously picked up a plastic bag. Alice noticed it and said: “Narumi?” I indifferently held the plastic bag and looked at it through the lights, and flipped it over to the back. At that moment I finally realized, the problem was not with the pills inside, but the bag itself.

“Alice……”

I knew that my voice was shaking.

“— do you have a water based pen?”

“Water based pen?”

“It’s okay as long as it’s water based. Lend me one if you have it.”

Not sure from what time, the other three were looking at me silently. I took the red pen from Alice’s hands, took out the pills, pressed the plastic bag against the walls and started to scribble on it from the corner.

“AH!” “AHHHHH!”

I’m not sure whose shouts were those, and might even be my own voice. The transparent plastic bag that was dyed red red— a pair of open wings surfaced on it because of waterproof materials.

“This is almost completely…… drawn using transparent paint, right?”

Major said in a low voice, and I nodded.

The same drawing was drawn on each bag with the same material, and the picture surfaced on it because of the water based ink. Same as the wings carved onto the pills but with one of them facing the opposite direction, they were the wings of an angel.

“Narumi…… This thing…… You found it……”

“…… But, what’s with this?”

Hiro asked.

“This is the shining wings, and that’s why the police and Hirasaka-gumi didn’t notice it.”

I answered, staring at a plastic bag that I didn’t paint on. You really won’t find it if you’re not looking closely at it through a light.

“So this is the shining wings?”

The statement of the drug dealer: ‘Glowing wings on their heads’

and ‘A song that could be heard’.

Those were not hallucinations caused by the drug—

All of them were real.

The same paint could be used on the face, and also on a cap; Playing Bob Dylan’s song non-stop, with their pockets full of the pink-colored magic drug.

“But why would the people who bought the pills realize it? It’s so strange.”

“The side effects of Angel Fix cause their vision and hearing to become extremely sensitive, so that’s why they found out about the signals, huh? Narumi.”

Alice answered in my stead, and I silently nodded.

‘It seemed that it had stopped’, ‘Could even see a slight movement’ , ‘Could win if I just close my eyes and listen to the sound’.

With just a correction— you would see the angels.

“They just have to wait for the people who had their minds sharpened after taking the drug. Is there really such a stupid way of selling?”

“The way they sell them is indeed stupid, but what if that’s exactly their purpose?”

“…… What do you mean by that?”

“The experiment! A human experiment to confirm how effective the drug is. Could they create believers who could find the angel wings and song on such a noisy street—

Alice caught a handful of the Angel Fix by her foot and spread them on her bed.

“— and so his experiment is successful.”

Tetsu-senpai stood with his mouth open, unable to say even one word.

After a moment of silence, Hiro said:

"…… All of them are your assumptions?"

"Of course."

Alice said while looking at the small hill of pills.

"…… So, what should we do then?"

After Major's words, the room sank into a silence.

The silence was heavy, as though it was frozen petrol, flowing into the room through the windows, because the five who were present knew what was coming next.

At that moment, I felt a sense of déjà vu that stiffened my whole body— I saw this scene before, as if I knew it a few thousand years, tens of thousands of years ago. That was what I felt, but of course that's probably just my imagination.

Even so, I still think that way right now. It might be because I saw my page on God's notebook before I was born, forgetting about the rest but clearly remembering what I should say in this situation.

Because, if there is a meaning for me to exist at this place on this moment—

Probably it's just for this purpose, right?

Thus, I spoke.

"I'll take the drug, and find the drug dealer."

Sitting beside me, Major gasped instead.

Alice just continued to stare at my eyes.

Tetsu-senpai heaved a long sigh and sat onto the computer rack.

Hiro finally said.

“We can’t let Narumi do these kinds of things……”

“Then who else is going to do it?”

I interrupted Hiro’s words unhesitatingly.

“Apart from myself, who else saw the drawing on the bag? People can’t just see it just by taking the drug, can they? If anyone could see it, then we should have noticed it earlier.”

“No, aren’t those just your assumptions?”

“Then! Are there any other ways? The only thing I can do is this! Even if you stop me, I’m still going to do it.”

I tightly held the plastic bag containing the Angel Fix, so tight that it was almost torn apart.

“Some people even died because of it, so……”

“Hiro, shut up.”

Alice’s majestic voice rang in the room.

Hiro showed a dumbstruck expression for a moment, and then looked like he immediately became an obedient leopard and lowered his head.

Alice stood up from her bed, black hair flowing on her delicate shoulders. The small queen who forced the wall of machines to obey herself looked at me from above with an icy gaze.

“Narumi, there’s no difference with eating the pills and dying. Even if your are okay physically, you would also die mentally, do you understand? Never mind, I don’t think you would understand, you won’t get it if you didn’t take it. This is a helpless contradiction."

I silently listened to Alice’s statement.

“But even so— if you are still determined to do it, I won’t stop you,

and will not let anyone stop you.”

I felt that my decision has already been made tens of thousands of years before, so I answered unhesitatingly:

“I will do it, because that’s what I’ve decided.”

A sad expression was shown on Alice’s face. Her long eyelashes drooped, as if she was going to wipe away tears, and opened her eyes again.

“Major, prepare a mini-microphone, earphones and a camera that can be fitted into a cap. Hiro and Tetsu will decide on the place and time. I’ll arrange all the information into a map.”

“Alice…… Is this really okay?”

Hiro looked at me and said restlessly. Alice just looked at him once and said:

“There’s no other way, we can only go forward on this road. This is __”

At that moment, Alice’s expression was really, truly lonely. The loneliness would make people feel as though their heart was directly entangled by thin threads as soon as they saw it, and an expression that would shatter into teardrops if too much force is used.

“This is the only feasible way. So don’t say anything, and do your own part.”

*

I was the last person out of the detective agency, because I was forced to stay and write Alice’s documents. The wind was so strong outside, even colder than the strong air conditioning inside the room. The brightness of the sleepless town shone onto the bottomless night. Not even one star was shining in the night skies.

I turned my head and stared at the signboard of the agency.

It’s the only NEET thing to do.

Is that really so? I don’t know, either.

But this is undeniably the only thing that I can do. It’s not for Ayaka, and not for Toshi, not for anyone, but for my own self.

Chapter 6

A strong tinge of purple pervaded the streets of that Friday night, the buses that bore their maws towards the bus stop were expelling large amounts of purple spots that stuck onto people's faces. During the red light, the purple spots gathered at the zebra crossing, flowing slowly. Why is it that the street isn't destroyed because of the bruises? I stood before the road, breathing in the pungent odor of the exhaust gas while thinking.

'…… Narumi, how do you feel?'

Alice's voice came from the earphones stuck in my ears.

"I feel like puking."

My voice had probably spread out through the microphone hidden in my muffler. The knitted cap on my head looked like a strangely shaped pot, and a camera was set up inside it; I'm starting to feel as if I'm not a person anymore. If I'm a robot, I would probably be able to get the repulsive feeling to disappear after pressing a button.

'If the repulsive feeling disappears, you won't be able to come back anymore. Listen, don't think about negative things, even thinking of the ice cream that Master made would be okay, as you'll be devoured by the drug.'

Alice's advice is just useless to me. The dry, bitter taste of Angel Fix is still lingering in my mouth. Because it was too bitter, I bit my mouth to hide the taste with blood, but it became more terrible instead. After a few minutes, I realized that using the taste of blood to hide the taste of the drug is already an abnormal thought, and a chill came upon my back. At this moment, the sense of wanting to puke came upon me once again.

I'm being devoured by the drug.

"…… I just feel that my eyes are strange today, it's like I'm looking at everything through an infrared camera. Why is everybody

wearing masks? Is there a festival today?"

'Narumi, calm down, nobody's wearing masks.'

'But….."

The green light lit up, and someone was pushing against my back. The masked crowd flowed from two sides of the road to the dark, murky river of the asphalt road. I was drawn into the crowd, and took a step forward.

Tetsu-senpai and Hiro should be tailing me somewhere, and that's my only consolation. If I couldn't even remember that, I'll probably just drown in the streets, not able to float ever again, right?

Hiro was in charge of tailing the drug dealer.

Tetsu-senpai, on the other hand, was in charge of— collecting my corpse.

Nobody knows if I will be able to find them, and I might just die in vain.

The horns of the cars are making my ears hurt. Going past the zebra crossing, in the crowd, the piercing music in the pharmacy is hurting my ears, and my head hurts too, the repulsive feeling is becoming stronger.

'Walk onto the slope from the street center, and wander around the Hotel Street.'

"Alice, why are you gnashing your teeth? It's so noisy, stop that."

' What are you talking about? I'm not gnashing my teeth.'

I only noticed after Alice said that, the teeth gnashing sound was the footsteps of high heeled shoes of a college student beside me who looked like a woman. I knotted my brows, stopped walking and kept my distance with her. But it's completely useless, footsteps came from all around me. I covered my ears, almost kneeling on the ground. Damn it! Why do women in the street always wear high heeled shoes, hurry up and change into flat ones!

‘What’s with you, Narumi? Am I talking too loudly?’

“It’s…… nothing.”

I used the back of my palm to wipe away the spit at the corner of my mouth and stood up again. The office ladies gave me a look and passed by me. Never mind, it’s just footsteps. I breathed in deeply, and held in the gastric acid that felt like it’s burning in my throat. How much time has passed since I took the medicine? Probably just twenty minutes? Or has two weeks already passed, and it’s just that I couldn’t remember? Angel? It’s just a repulsive feeling.

While moaning, I walked to the west of the street center. I felt terrible when I passed through the playground, the flood of noises made me feel that I was shot at from the side by a thousand air guns.

‘Vice Admiral Fujishima, please take note. Your blood pressure is rising rapidly.’

Major’s voice came from the earphones. I placed my hand on my left wrist. Not only did Major set up cameras, microphones and earphones, he even installed things to measure my pulse, blood pressure and body temperature. I feel like I’m a robot that’s controlled from afar.

‘Narumi, you’re probably going to cross the boundary between reality and hallucination soon, you must think of something happy!’

Something happy?

Three uniformed girls passed by my side while exiting a HMV Record Store. It’s our school uniform. Happy moments in my memory—

‘Don’t think of Ayaka!’

Alice sensed my thoughts with her acute intuition, and tried to stop me with her piercing voice. But she was too late. I was forced to relive the moments with Ayaka on the rooftop that day, the night skies were at the other side of the railing. Ayaka was at my side, and the watering can wettened my hand. Ayaka said: Just wait until

spring comes…… and then it changed to spring. The night skies were chased away, and my body was surrounded by a gentle, gold radiance……

What is this?

I stood at the center of the crossroad, the road was surrounded by buildings full of colorful neon lights. Raising my head to look at the sky, I saw it.

"…… Angel?"

'Narumi, what did you see? Whatever it is, just tell me, try to describe it, and don't just sink in the feeling.'

I squinted, hugging the streetlight, because it seemed like I would be flushed away by the radiance if I didn't do so.

"Alice, hey, have you ever looked at the surroundings from the centre of an explosion?"

'Sorry, but I'm a hikikomori, so I've never seen an explosion before. But even if I have a chance to see it in the future, I'll politely decline your recommendation of how to watch it.'

"Really? Because that's what I'm feeling right now."

I stretched out my hand towards a light particle. The sweet flow of electricity passed through my fingers, my head.

"Ahhhh……."

I let out my hot breath. From god knows when, the repulsive feeling and my headache vanished. The sensation that took their place filled my skull, the power that melted the snow accumulated through the winter, the power that pulled the sun out from the surface of the sea during a new day. I knew what that power was called, everyone knew it, it's just that the people who couldn't see angels have forgotten about it.

I thought, Toshi probably saw the same scene, huh? If that is so, then I'll forgive him. I'll forgive Ayaka who jumped off the school

building without saying a word, because she just went to see the angels. You see, if you just stretch out your hands, angels are around us. Forgive those faceless, purple patients who are just swept through the night, they just don't know the existence and the name of this light.

"Alice, do you know what this is called?"

Even my own mutterings turned into brilliant light particles, intercrossing with my white breathing and spreading out.

'I know, it's love. Love makes the world go round.'

The sweet voice of the young girl was quoting the lyrics from Bob Dylan's songs, yes, it's love. Before Dylan gave it to us, he might not have known about its name, too. But we know, its name is love, so I am definitely not letting go.

'Narumi, but you're looking for another song, remember? It's Knockin' on Heaven's Door'.'

Hearing Alice's words, I remembered. That's right, I've forgotten. I have to search for heaven's door.

I need to meet Ayaka.

I stepped on the surface of the night river, every step turned into a ripple and spread to the whole world. The whole world is beckoning to me, saying that they exist because of me, and that we are one and the same. I raised my fist to the sky that was raining feathers of the angels, and felt that I had to sing. I was born for this moment, to accept the guidance of the rays of love, walk up the slope, and open the doors to heaven. Listen, there's a faint sound of the plucking of a guitar. The hostels arranged side by side are palaces of gold, the sounds of footsteps, noises, the sounds of the engines of cars further away, the sounds of thousands of the outer unit of air conditioners, the sound of wet breathing due to lust, all of them combined into a chorus of holy music, getting close to Dylan's husky voice.

' Knockin' on heaven's door…….'

I heard it. I could really hear it. In the tens of thousands of music that were gently caressing me, I could differentiate Dylan's music. I found Dylan's singing voice.

"…… I found it."

At the instant when I was murmuring to myself, joy that was close to melancholy gushed out from my mouth and my ears, then splattered onto my skin.

The man was leaning against the steel door that looked sticky and filthy because of spray paint, and gradually squatted down. His head was lowered, and he tapped his knees to the tempo of the holy music with earphones on his ears.

'Narumi, you found him? Really?'

Don't you know? Can't you see it? Shining wings are clearly drawn on both of the man's cheeks, it's so dazzling, too.

'Narumi, answer me if you've found him, and don't get any closer!'

The voice of the young girl resounded in my ears. With my hands on the wall of the hostel, I slowly walked towards the angel. It felt just like stepping on clouds. Very soon I'm going to reach him, very soon.

'Tetsu, catch hold of Narumi, and don't get caught! Hiro, you know it, right? He's the one who's wearing a leather jacket and squatting down with earphones on. You can't get caught by him! And don't let him run away! Narumi! Narumi! Get a hold of yourself!'

I pulled off the noisy earphone. The song of the angel flowed directly into my mind. This is the music of the song Knockin' on Heaven's Door. I'll get there soon. Soon I'll be able to see Ayaka again. Just as I was about to stretch out my hand, someone fiercely caught hold of my shoulders.

Let go! Let go of me!

I struggled until my wrist almost broke off. He's flying away, the angel is flying away. The door that was opening soon is closing. I

clutched the asphalt road with my fingers, not noticing that I was lying on the ground. That's why the ray of light is above me, until darkness and the long, dark clouds gradually covered up my eyelids. I repeatedly knocked on heaven's door, again and again, again and again, knocked and knocked……

*

I think everyone has thought at least once when they were little, why do humans continue to live, because there isn't a simple and clear answer written in the textbooks of this country (An answer existed in the past, but was burned down during the Second World War and the collapse of the economy).

Some people made a simple conclusion, that is to obtain happiness, and then stopped thinking about it; while the people who couldn't stop thinking about it realized that this answer is just another way of phrasing the question, and in the end they sank deeper into the swamp of questions.

Some people were already satisfied with the answer on the P.E textbook during high school, the three main requirements of humans, a meaningless answer; And some people even answered it in a cycle— living is to search for the meaning of our existence; there were also some people who started to read philosophical books just so that they could have a cool answer if they were asked, but in the end stopped after they read the first paragraph of the forth page, and completely forgot about the question.

I am not any of those people.

Before I became an awkward high school student, I was a not so awkward middle school student. Those days, I skipped school before, and pondered about the question while sitting beside the riverbank.

Because we don't want to die— that was the only possible answer I could think of. Though this answered the question 'Why do humans want to live', it still couldn't answer the question 'What do humans live for'. At least I still knew that when I was in middle school.

Apart from that, I had a strong suspicion for the definition that to live means that you haven't died yet. That's because I knew that another type of incomprehensible people who exists in this world—those who aren't dead, but aren't really living either, for instance my father. From the day when my mom passed away because of an accident, it was like a part of my father was brought to a different world. This is one of the rare things that I agree with my sister. After that, father was almost never at home, and just mailed us money for our daily expenses.

As long as you are living, you can't evade death. Some people could only reach this conclusion after a whole life of ignorance, so I, who understood this just by observing my relatives, am actually quite lucky.

If there is no meaning to life, then why do we live? I, who was still thirteen at that time, was wearing my uniform with wet pants as the grassy land beside the river was wet with dew. After that day, I didn't take any step forward.

But there is one thing that I can be sure of.

There wouldn't be any answer no matter how I thought. Even if there's a formula for solving problems, there are too many unknowns. But if I understood, it would probably a split second understanding, just like being struck by lightning.

But what would I become after that?

Would I still be myself?

*

When I woke up, I felt an extended, severe pain.

When I tried to open my eyes, there was an uncomfortable resistance like I was trying to pick away a scab.

It's so bright. The piercing lights hurt my eyes.

There seemed to be a shadow in front of me. What is is?

I didn't realize after quite some time that the shadow was the upside down face of a young girl.

"Narumi, welcome back."

The young girl was smiling, her black hair sliding from her shoulders onto my neck.

I tried to sit, and felt the pain of my stiff back tightening. I frowned.

I was sleeping on the bed in Alice's room, surrounded by the black machines on the wall, the sound of the fan turning and the cold artificial air.

It was obviously extremely cold, but there wasn't even a small reaction from my body.

I looked at my palms, feeling that this isn't my body. I have obviously seen my skin and the wrinkles on it for thousands of times, but if you just lifted the thin layer of skin, it would feel like it is filled with an unknown liquid. That is what I felt at that moment.

Then, where did my body go?

`My soul— where did it vanish to?

I thought of the moment I saw the angel, the moment that it fused with the stunningly radiant world. Even so, all of that have vanished.

No.

They did not vanish.

"How do you feel….. What a stupid question!"

Alice murmured behind me.

Asking me how I feel? Do you even need to ask?

Terrible.

My head didn't hurt, and I didn't feel repulsive, even the pain in my

teeth vanished, and I couldn't even feel the cold. But, but—

I understood.

I didn't even have to think about it. What have Toshi said to me at that moment? I think it's something like the reason that we continue to live is to stimulate our nerves. But why did Toshi, the person who was directly stimulated by the angels, and I feel so terrible? That quite clear, it's because Toshi's answer isn't the answer. Stimulating our nerves for the sense of comfort is only a part of living, the pleasure is our goal and not just a trick, it's one of the reasons of the error in the formula of its design. The one who I am right now— the one who had been guided by the angel have seen that formula. The variable of the red pills giving pleasure, it's just a simple calculation, everyone knows the answer for that, everyone knows.

The answer is zero.

There is absolutely no meaning to life.

Even breathing and heartbeats could make people feel painful, I tightly held the blanket, my shoulders shaking, trying to contain the pain. No, why am I containing it? It'll be okay if I just stop, stop breathing, stop the flow of blood, stop thinking about everything. If the statement that people continue to live because they don't want to die is true, then the opposite must be correct as well.

If only I would stop.

"— Your request has already been completed, right?"

It was Alice's voice. I turned my head over.

I finally realized that Alice was not wearing pajamas, but a black dress. The darkness that lacked luster wrapped her whole body, even her gloves were black. She wore a bonnet, and a thin veil covered her entire face.

They were clothes for people in mourning.

“…… Request?”

“You gave me a request, right? It’s because you wanted to know the true reason for Ayaka’s suicide. You already know now, so the request has been completed, isn’t that right?

“Wha……”

Looking at the back of Alice’s shoulder, a switched off computer screen reflected my face— a raised, crooked face. There wasn’t even a hint of anger on it. The face looked like it belonged to a dead person, reddish black markings surfaced below the eyes, as if it was drawn onto the face with charcoal.

“…… ah, AAHHH!”

I remember this face, I’ve remembered. On that freezing dawn, blood spread in the garden, Ayaka who stared at the skies with black eyes, there were those same markings on that face.

The reason for Ayaka’s suicide.

I’ve understood.

Alice have said before this, there is absolutely no mystery concerning Ayaka’s suicide, so I don’t need to think why she wanted to die. As Alice have said, I don’t need to think at all. The thoughts and emptiness in my heart are the answer.

Because Ayaka knew it too.

Living is meaningless.

“To explain in a scientific way……”

Alice said. The fuzzy face of the young girl gradually became clearer.

“Bruises like that appearing is a sign of being allergic to the contents of Angel Fix. There are some people who are not suited to taking the drug. Both you and Ayaka are this type of people, it’s that simple. The signs of allergy would cause a strong sense of emptiness after the hallucinations fade, do you understand? What you are feeling right now is only a horrendous hallucination caused

by the drug, that might be the facts but not the truth."

So…… So what?

Alice shifted her gaze away from me, as if she was pained.

"Another way of saying that would be, it is not the truth…… but the facts. I know that this explanation is utterly meaningless. The despair and happiness that you felt, all of them are chemical reactions that are released by your nervous system due to the drug."

Is that so……. Utterly meaningless. So all of our emotions: anger, sadness, happiness and emptiness, all of them are chemical reactions.

So, all of them are true facts.

"The drug would amplify all your emotions, no matter how tiny your regret is, or even the guilt because of the sin of planting the flowers. Even if it isn't deliberate, there is no room for negotiation in front of the drug. In front of the facts, the truth could only stay silent. So……"

The dark eyes gazed at me.

"I wouldn't say anything to stop you."

I gazed at the small, pale pink mouth.

"If you plan to change into that, I have no power to stop you. However……"

The folded paper that was held in Alice's hands, is the will that Alice forced me to write the day that I decided to take the Angel Fix. At that moment, I was completely clueless to the reason that Alice asked me to write it, so the contents in it were only hastily scribbled things.

The one who wrote the will is not the person that I am now.

"But, I will definitely tell people about you. Telling people that you did indeed exist, telling them you were brave, telling them you

finished the thing that you should do."

The thing I should do.

The thing I should do?

The sound of an opening door came from behind me.

"Hey! Alice! Why did you tell Yondaime!"

It was Tetsu-senpai's furious voice. I turned around and met his gaze, and senpai who was about to walk into the room was taken aback, his whole body stiff.

"Narumi, so you're awake? Are you okay?"

I weakly nodded.

"Has Hiro brought his car? We can't let Yondaime wait for so long, he'll become anxious. Let's go!"

"Alice, you're going too?"

"Don't you understand after seeing my clothes? Yondaime can't be stopped if I don't go."

"Ah…… Oi! Why did you tell Yondaime? The people from Hirasaka-gumi already surrounded their hideout, and would probably slaughter everyone inside."

Ah, Toshi and the others were found?

That's right, I ate the Angel Fix because of this I've already forgotten about it. Now that I think about it, it felt like it happened a lifetime ago.

Finished the thing that I should do.

So what?

Alice crawled to my side and walked down from the bed.

"There is a business contract between Yondaime and I. As a

detective, I am responsible for providing all information about Fix. Furthermore, there's at least seven to eight people at their side, right? Anyhow, we must borrow the strength of Hirasaka-gumi.

"But……"

"That is why I gave them a condition, they can't take action before I appear. I assure you, I have a plan, and wouldn't let them do anything to Toshi."

Unsatisfied, Tetsu-senpai sank into a silence and walked out of the room.

Alice turned around.

Half of my face was buried in the pillow, but I felt her gaze through the black veil.

"All of this is because of your contribution. To me, the things that happen after that are just gifts for our satisfaction, but to you….. There's probably no difference, right?"

No difference.

"…… I'm going out. You can just continue to sleep here if you want to, and if you want to jump off a building, please walk further to your right, move the rack and then you can open the windows to jump out of it. But it's just the third floor here, so it's not guaranteed that your attempt would be successful."

"…… Are you going?"

"I've said so already, didn't I? I want to know why Ayaka wanted to jump from the school rooftop. Toshi and Hakamizaka should know something. For this reason, and only for this reason, I'm doing things to this extent, even though it's meaningless even after I know it."

"…… Are you just leaving me here?"

I slowly got up, my voice like the buzzing of a mosquito. Alice tilted her head at me slightly.

“Do you want to go with me? Why? You really don’t need to go along with my self-satisfaction.”

I shook my head. I don’t really want to follow her, and actually don’t want to go anywhere or do anything. But……

“Then—“

“……. Go yourself!”

Alice’s eyes widened.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m telling you not to leave me alone and go yourself!”

A hoarse shout came out from my throat.

“Always looking like you know everything, triumphantly saying all those devious things, but couldn’t you understand such a simple thing if I didn’t say so?”

I didn’t know why I was so angry, but was only venting my emotions, which felt like pieces of hot, scorching irons, on the fuzzy shadow in front of me.

“Just order me around as usual! Can’t you see that I can’t recover by my own? I feel all empty inside, and can’t go anywhere! Just give me any order! If not, I- I- I……”

I tightly held the side of the bed, and coughed violently like I was squeezing out all the air inside of my body, and my bones felt as if they were all shattering. But, my body is already useless anyways. These hands, these feet, all of them are useless, and can’t help anyone anymore. So no matter what, even if they become rotten, just pretend that they don’t exist from the start. If even these people forgot about me—

A cold hand was placed on my neck.

My body had a spasm, it was like the cold hand was absorbing heat, suppressing my trembling lungs, shoulders and heart.

“— That’s true, your request has already been completed….. But you haven’t given me my payment yet.”

I bore the pain that felt as if my skin was being torn off, and raised my head. The first thing that I saw was Alice’s smile that was framed with her black hair that was flowing like a river.

“Then just work till you drop, because you’re my assistant! Your hands, your legs, your eyes, your ears, your throat, your nails, your teeth, your tongue, and even your last drop of blood……”

The diminutive queen pointed at my forehead lightly with her index finger.

“— all of them are now my property.”

*

Gazing at the skies from the back seat of the car, I could see the crimson sun setting.

Hiro sat on the driver’s seat and said: “You slept for about fifteen hours already.” Tetsu-senpai sat on the front leat, while Alice was stuck in the middle of Major and I. Alice tightly hugged her baby bear plushie that was somewhat smaller than her mocha bear, and was called Lyril. The blue foreign car set out with its back to the road beside the river, bringing an eccentric group of five and a bear, only the translucent, white moon was chasing us.

“I’ve contacted Narumi’s family. They weren’t worried at all. By the way, do remember to introduce your sister to me after this.”

Almost at the same time, Tetsu-senapi pulled Hiro’s hair while Major aimed a kick at the driver’s seat. But I didn’t laugh. After Hiro said that, I remembered fuzzily, so I have family. I just feel that the last time I went home, it was already three years ago.

During our journey, Alice didn’t say even one word. Hugging her plushie until even her fingernails turned deathly white, Alice was even sweating cold sweat.

Well, this girl is a hikikomori, after all. Why must she go out even so? It was obvious that she could just hand it to Yondaime and Tetsu-senpai, and the matter would end.

While looking at the moon, I thought, this problem is going to end soon.

Meeting Ayaka— when was that again? It was on November. January is going to end soon, so we've known each other for about three months now. If I would describe this with old-fashioned terms, I would say that it was like I had a long dream.

Everything had a sense of emptiness before I closed my eyes, so would it be even emptier after waking up?

It's going to end soon.

The car swayed with force and stopped.

The commercial street without much business going on— there were a noodle shop, a photo shop, a bicycle shop and a pet store. It's just five in the evening, and they've already closed. It was just a five minute trip from the station, but it was so deserted that you couldn't imagine that they're in the same district.

At the parking lot that was so big that it doesn't match with the desolate commercial street, there gathered young men who were wearing black T-shirts with a swallowtail butterfly emblem printed on it. Hiro parked the car at the side of the parking lot.

"Ane-san, thanks for your hard work!"

"Thanks for your hard work."

Tens of vicious-looking yakuza shonens bowed to the young girl who walked down of the car with a plushie in her hands, and the scene was dyed orange by the setting sun. At this instant, I saw a supernatural scene that isn't strange even if the world ended.

"Aniki, thanks for your hard work too."

"I've heard, aniki gambled with his life to find this place."

“As expected of aniki.”

Rocky and Pole surrounded me. I shifted my gaze and shook my head. I didn’t do anything, and can’t do anything as well.

The wolf donning a crimson jacket separated the members of Hirasaka-gumi and came closer to us.

“Is it okay for you to go out……”

Yondaime looked at Alice with his head lowered, saying with a worried look on his face.

“Of course it’s not okay, can’t you see after seeing this?”

Using the plushie to cover over half of her face, Alice was still determined to say those annoying words even though her hands were trembling slightly.

“Why are you deliberately coming out? It’s the same with that last incident, you always come out when things are coming to an end.”

“That’s because I’m a NEET detective. No matter how arrogantly I leaned on an armchair, telling you my assumptions, I still have to fill my hands full of blood in the end. If I didn’t do so, I would only come into contact with the world of the dead forever.”

Alice said with a pained voice, her lips turning purple. I didn’t understand what she was saying. Yondaime placed his hand on his forehead and shaked his head.

“We’ve surrounded them, but not even one person came out. However, it was so quiet in there since an hour ago that it makes people feel uncomfortable.”

Yondaime used his chin to point at the four-storey building beside the parking lot.

“Have you entered it?”

“Didn’t you say that I can’t enter? We’ve confirmed that there’s at least six people in there. Hey! So we can attack right now, right?

You should remember that we've waited for a few hours already."

"No, Toshi is our partner."

"Do you think I would specially forgive anyone?"

"I don't think so, so……" Alice hid behind Tetsu-senpai. "So Tetsu will accept Judgment in place of Toshi."

A shocked expression appeared on Tetsu-senpai's face. He heaved a sigh after his body stiffened for awhile.

"Saying something like 'I've got a plan'…… So that's how it is."

Like they've confirmed with each other in advance, Yondaime sighed too.

The said Judgment of Hirasaka-gumi is really just a fight.

"Oioioioi! Sou-san and Tetsu-san are having a fight to the finish!"

"How's the results right?"

"Forty three wins, forty nine losses, and three draws."

"Then isn't the result clear already?"

"Okay, I'll bet five thousand on Sou-san."

"I'll bet ten thousand on Tetsu-san!" "You traitor!" "There's no choice, how could the bet continue if I don't do that?" "If that's the case, toughen up a bit, Tetsu-san."

The black shirted men suddenly started a bet.

"Oi! You guys—" Yondaime hurriedly tried to stop them, but it was too late. They've already decided on the dealer, and started to bet. Yondaime's followers formed a human wall, forming a temporary boxing ring at the center of the parking lot. Alice sneakily walked away from Tetsu-senpai's back, and only senpai and Yondaime were left in the centre to face each other.

"Oh, forget it. This type of idiotic end is just our style."

Senpai laughed wryly while tying bandages on his fists.

With a bitter face, Yondaime bit back the words that he was going to say, took of his jacket and threw it behind him.

“Sou-san, please use your secret technique!” “Tetsu-san, I’m leaving my ten thousand to you!”

The lackey’s rough cheering interlaced together. I was dumbfounded for a moment because of the idiotic end. Alice pulled the hem of my jacket.

“Narumi, we’re going in, so don’t space out. Major, hurry up and open the lock.”

“Ehhh? But Tetsu-senpai is stil……”

“Do you even have to ask? That’s just a diversion. If you really wait until Yondaime goes in, he won’t hear anyone’s words.”

Major was already taking out the tools for opening the lock. Yondaime’s voice echoed over. So we’ve still been noticed huh?

“Oi! Alice! You let me wait for so long, and then you’re going in by yourself?”

Alice slowly turned over and pointed at Yondaime.

“Oh? You’re not giving up on the God’s Judgment that has already started, are you?”

“But……”

Tetsu-senpai, who had already prepared his battle stance, smiled wryly while shortening his distance with Yondaime. Yondaime could only unwillingly raise his fists.

“Oi! You guys go too!” Yondaime ordered his followers beside him while keeping his eyes on Tetsu-senpai.

“……. Eh? No no no, this match really can’t be missed.”

“We’ll regret it forever if we missed it.”

“My ten thousand.”

“Shut up! You idiots hurry up and go! If only they went in, what if something happens?”

At the instant when the steel door was pried open, a strange smell rushed over and stimulated our senses— it was the smell of a type of plant, the choking, bitter and fresh smell of a plant. It was a familiar smell to me. Among the ten other people who went into the building, only I was familiar with the smell, as though it was still lingering in my mouth. As soon as we entered, we saw a cramped, dusty hall, and quite a few ragged sofas piled at a corner, as if it was an abandoned hospital.

“Alice, why don’t you just wait in the car?”

Hiro said in a low murmur. Alice pressed her bear forcefully onto my back, and shook her head while holding on to me. I turned my head over, and I could see that she looked even more terrible than just now.

“Do you want me to continue living completely without coming in contact with this world? Don’t joke with me.”

The black shirted men passed by us an ran to the stairs.

“Four of you search the first floor.

“Can be just beat them up if we see anyone?”

“You’re being too aggressive!”

Footsteps echoed in the building.

I looked at my palm again. The feeling of being cut open both physically and mentally is still lingering in my body. The feeling will never disappear now. Do I have to continue to live, being imprisoned in a body that is not mine? Being unable to use my own hand to touch any object.

The basement was a large, cubical space. There were facilities for factories used for manufacturing set up in the whole of the building. Walking down the stairs, the appearance of the factory could be seen from the handrail. The machines arranged side by side with its back to the walls were like large fridges, sandbags were carelessly piled up at a corner, the table was full of test tubes, and the flashing fluorescent light lit up the room uncomfortably. Water kept dripping into the sink from the open tap. The air of the basement was filled with a familiar smell. Hiro, Major and the black shirted men frowned, used their sleeves to cover their noses, and walked down the stairs.

Black sofas that had their legs cut off were arranged in a line as a replacement for a beds, and quite a few men were stacked together on it.

It was like an elephant had a rampage in the room, as quite a few racks were lying down on the floor. A man used his white robe as a blanket, sitting on a slanted rack, tiredly leaning his back against the bare cement wall, while fragments of glass were scattered around his feet.

“Heh……”

The man slowly raised his head, looked at me— no, Alice, who was behind me, and showed us a disgusting smile. He was very much different from my memory of his appearance, and also the photos that Alice found. His hair so long that it touched his collar, his face was sunken, while his widened eyes behind his glasses looked like they almost dropped out.

But I immediately knew that he was Hakamizaka Shirou.

“What a delicate angel. Are you Alice?”

Hakamizaka laughed piercingly at the faraway ceiling.

“I’ve heard about you from Shinozaki…… You’re really a child. I’ve never thought that you would find us so quickly, it’s so delightful.”

Hiro pushed me away and went closer to Hakamizaka to ask: “Hey!

Where's Toshi?"

"Probably somewhere over there! He took quite a lot too, I'm not sure if he's alive or dead. Hmph, of course, we, ourselves, should enjoy our last stocks."

A chill came over my back.

This guy is hopeless.

All of the things in this room has already died.

Hiro and two back shirted men walked past the fallen racks and tables, and walked towards the room. Moans came from a sandbag nearby.

"Toshi! Hey! Toshi! Get a hold of yourself! Can you puke them out? Hurry up and throw up!"

Hiro said in a pained voice.

"Oi! Get some water here."

It was the flustered footsteps of the black shirted men. Hakamizaka looked at the small commotion and laughed through his nose.

Alice tightly held my arms.

"Hakamizaka Shirou, do you think that your experiment has succeeded?"

Facing Alice's questions, Hakamizaka raised his eyebrow.

"Of course it's a success, doesn't it seem like a success to you? Haven't everyone seen the real world? An in reality, some people had been taken away by the angels too. Angel Fix used its own power to form a spreading system cycle, could other medicine do this? Only I did it! Thus, my experiment is a success! I've succeeded!"

The uncomfortable laughter that was like the sounds of someone scratching his back came again. I don't want to hear him talk, and

don’t want to even hear his voice anyone. Anyone, just hurry up and take him away.

But Alice asked again.

“…… Do you think Ayaka is a successful case too?”

“Ayaka?”

“Toshi’s sister.”

Hakamizaka’s eyes lost its focus.

“Ahhh…… That couldn’t be helped. She realized the truth of the flowers, and said that she was going to call the police, so I could only force her to take the pills. Now…… She fell into a coma…… right?”

“You’ve forced her to take it?” Major jumped onto the rack, grabbing Hakamizaka’s collar.

` “So what? Not taking it is a sin.”

Hakamizaka’s answer started to become garbled.

“Alice, can I try the interrogation methods of the People’s Liberation Army on him?”

“Major, stop that. Don’t dirty your knife with his flesh and blood.”

I subconsciously held Alice’s hand tightly.

It’s a simple thing, there’s no mystery.

Ayaka was just unable to take the hallucinations brought by the drug anymore, so she jumped off the building.

It’s that simple.

The Fix amplified her guilt for planting the flowers that were used as the raw material that were used for manufacturing the drug, causing Ayaka to be engulfed by her own guilt.

Hakamizaka's voice echoed in my empty mind.

"I feel sorry for her too, as I didn't mean to kill her at first."

"And you're saying you didn't mean to kill here?" Major interrupted with a livid voice. Even so, Hakamizaka continued to mutter.

"Shinozaki was a good girl. She thought that I'm a specialist of poppy flowers, and chatted happily with me about gardening. I've planned to give her money as payment, but she only said that it's okay if I gave her flowers……"

"Flowers?"

Alice took half a step out from my back.

"Ayaka said that she wanted flowers?"

"That's right. She said that she needed a lot of the same flower, so from the time she started to plant, she've probably planted about a thousand or so?"

"What flower is it?"

"It's a weed called long-headed poppy, quite a nice flower! She had the same interest as me. It's a pity that she went to hell. Occasionally, there would be people who mistake the angel as a reaper, those people are not qualified to pass through the radiant door."

Hakamizaka's glared at me.

"…… You're the same……. You took the pills, right? Haha, it's as I've said. It's such a pity, but unlike you, I'll be taken to the heavens!"

His words chilled me to the marrows.

As Hakamizaka have said, I felt regret.

I couldn't reach the light, and couldn't catch the angel's hand. I have already lost it, and I will never have the chance ever again.

What took its place is an emptiness that was like a dry darkness sticking to my hands.

“You…… What do you want to do?”

I really don’t need to ask, but my mouth acted without permission. Hakamizaka’s eyebrows twitched like a mutated organism.

“Having seen it with your own eyes, shouldn’t you already understand? Get it? There’s a door at the other side of the dazzling whirlwind, it’s a heavy door made of mahogany, and is always open for about two centimeters, and you could see the other side from there.”

Hakamizaka’s screeching voice became even more high-pitched.

“It’s nighttime, an eternal night. It is like Greece from four thousand and five hundred years ago. The time forms a cycle, and flows eternally. The moon shines on the bricks that were corroded and mottled because of the sea breeze, and everyone are singing side by side on the pure white beach. I’ve tried to put my fingers onto the door, but I was dragged back here every time. I couldn’t reach it, as it couldn’t be reached without a pile of corpses below me. I’ll definitely be able to this time, this, time, definitely……”

I wanted to retort, but a fluffy thing was stuffed into my hands, interrupting my words. After handing the plushie to me, Alice walked out from my back. She walked to the gap between the fallen racks, reached the place where Hakamizaka was at and stared at his face.

“Can you see me? Who do I look like?”

“…… Angel……”

“That’s right, I’ve seen God’s Notepad. I saw the namelist that consists of a hundred and forty thousand and four thousand people, but I didn’t see your name on in.”

“…… Liar!”

“God did not summon you to his country, and didn’t even record

your name. Just pass your last moments in this warm darkness! That is the eternal punishment that you deserve."

"LIAR! LI- AR!"

Hakamizaka's head sagged to the other side, his starkly pale Adam's apple was visible in the darkness.

In the silence that was mixed with noise, Alice turned her head over. Her black dress fused with the darkness, and only her white face was faintly visible behind her veil.

"…… What did you say to him?" Major said with a tiny voice that was almost like the sound of him breathing.

"I didn't say anything, because he made me angry, so I just said some empty words to upset the drug addict. How could we let these people off the hook?"

Alice returned to my side, and snatched away her doll from me, who was at a loss. She returned to my back again, and tightly held the sleeve of my shirt.

"Let's go! Narumi, things have ended now."

A low murmur came from behind me.

"All the clues have lined up in a straight line, there's nothing left to see here. Just let Hirasaka-gumi handle the rest. My work is done, and there's no room for a detective right now."

*

At the center of the parking lot that was dyed purple due to the setting sun, Yondaime and Tetsu-senpai sat face to face with their foreheads and fists close together. I really have no idea what they're doing. The two probably had a huge fight, huh? A few red scratches could be seen on their face, and their clothes were filthy. The bodyguards Rocky and Pole went closer to look, as if they were worried. When we had a closer look, we finally realized that they were finger wrestling.

“You guys are still at it…….”

Alice said with a surprised tone.

“You’re the one who told us to fight!”

“I will not give up so easily! You hit me about three punches more!”

Sounds of footsteps entered the parking lot, interrupting Yondaime and Tetsu-senpai’s extended match. Yondaime showed us a ferocious expression, patted away the sand on his knees and stood up.

Rocky asked: “So- Sou-san isn’t going to continue, what about the bet?” and was immediately beaten up by Yondaime! “Shut up!”

Almost all the members of Hirasaka-gumi who went into the building had came back. Major and Hiro were there, and even Toshi, who was leaning on Hiro’s elbow, was present.

Yondaime asked: “…… So?”

“There’s eight people in total. There weren’t anyone above the second floor, but almost all of them lost consciousness because of the drug. The only person who could talk is this guy.” One of the black shirted men pointed at Toshi with his chin.

“Have you called the ambulance yet?”

“Understood!”

Yondaime nodded. I thought, surprised: So he really will save people?

One of the lackeys said quietly to me: “It’s useless to hit the drug addicts who lost consciousness. We’ll have to wait till they’re out of the hospital to beat them up.” What a polite yakuza shonen.

“Then what about Toshi? Stop your meaningless fight.”

Yondaime shouted angrily at Hiro. Hiro shut his mouth, and slowly placed Toshi’s body onto the asphalt road.

Toshi was crying.

His eyes seemed that they're conscious. His glasses were crooked, face swollen, saliva and tears flowing to his chin, and he was muttering to himself.

Do you have any right to cry? It was as though a viscous, cold magma-like liquid flowed into my empty body.

"Why…… Why did you save me? Just leave me alone……"

I could hear Toshi's mutterings. Didn't you ask us to save you yourself? Are you joking?

Yondaime glared at Alice, who was behind me.

" 'Your fists do not exist just to punch these pitiful people', don't try to tell me meaningless stuff like this."

"I won't say them. I don't hate decay as much as I hate ignorance, but I still hate it. But Yondaime, is revenge really that important to you? Would your world collapse if you don't take an eye for eye, and a tooth for a tooth?"

"Of course." Yondaime immediately answered: "Don't ask questions that you already know the answer for, there's nothing more important in my world than revenge."

"That's right! This is really a dumb question."

Alice looked as if she was smiling.

"But Yondaime, even so, revenge is not your mission this time. Do you get what I mean?"

A shocked expression suddenly appeared on Yondaime's face, which turned into anger. In the end, he heaved a sigh and calmed down, scratching his head while saying:

"Ah— Oh— So that's how it is. Damn it, you really are a troublesome person. I get it, I get it! I'll just get back."

Finally, the wolf gazed at me.

Putting on his jacket again, Yondaime turned his back to us.

“Gardening Club kid, there’s no time to ask anymore. Settle things before the ambulance is here.”

His words were like a signal, Tetsu-senpai and the black shirted men, everyone kept their distance from me. Me? Why me?

“Narumi!”

Alice, who stuck to my back, muttered.

“Just ask if you have anything to ask him, and just say if you have something to say. This is your request, so you should end things.”

And then the temperature of her body left my side.

The only people in the center of the circle were me, and the squatting Toshi.l

Something I want to ask?

Ayaka….. Did she have any last words?

Do I really want to know these kind of things? Don’t I already know the answer? She was blinded by the drug, so it’s impossible for her to think of me. If she have thought, if she had thought about me—

She shouldn’t just leave without saying anything.

“Oi, Narumi…… Give me the pills. There should be some there…… right? I’ve just puked them all out…… Blast……”

Toshi’s unpleasant mutterings were like bubbles that popped out from the bottom of mud, jumping on the surface of my consciousness, causing me to become nauseous.

“I can’t go on any more anyways……Just let me die. Trash like me- like me- is- is already…..”

I don’t have anything to ask, or anything I want to know. Even so,

even so……

“…… stand up!”

My voice was garbled. It’s just a simple sentence, but it made pain course through my windpipe. Toshi looked at me as if he was about to melt.

“I’m telling you to stand up.”

Toshi was lying down unmoving on the asphalt road. I grabbed the back of his collar, and forcefully made him stand up. His body was so light that it’s scary.

“Narumi, do you need the bandages?”

Tetsu-senpai said behind me. I turned over and shook my head.

After that, I faced Toshi again, took half a step back, twisted my hips and punched.

At the instant when the punch landed on Toshi’s face, the bones of my fingers and my wrist lamented in agony, the numbing pain echoed in my skull. Toshi spitted out saliva that was mixed with blood and collapsed, lying down at the foot of the members of Hirasaka-gumi, who had formed a boxing ring. When you hit someone, you would feel pain yourself. I must use my own body and my bare fists, to confirm this simple fact again.

“Don’t sleep! Stand up!”

I caught hold of Toshi’s wrists, and stepped on his foot, making him stand up. My left fist punched at his abdomen, and his body curved in an arc after being punched. He flew backwards, and I landed a right punch on his chin. Severe pain spread through my whole body. Not only my fingers were dirty because of Toshi’s blood, my own bones might have fractured too. Because of my heartbeat, and even my eardrums were throbbing in pain. That is a real pain that belongs to my real world.

Someone placed his hand on my shoulder. I only realized that the unpleasant sound, was the sound of my shoulders heaving because

of my ragged breathing. Toshi was lying down on the asphalt road, weeping while trembling.

“Narumi, that’s enough.”

Hiro’s gentle voice clearly rang on my back.

Tetsu-senpai and Major squatted down and carried Toshi.

Just like that, my sixteen year old winter came to an end like a long dream.

After waking up, my soul felt empty, even hitting other people couldn’t fill it up.

The siren of an ambulance could be heard in a distance. I looked downwards, unfeeling, my hands were full of blood, and my fingers could only open halfway. Those are my hands, my pain, my body, they’re finally back. It’s something that I have to continue to drag on and continue to go forward— myself.

Chapter 7

So I continued to live on hopelessly.

Our resilience is just too meaningless, and cause us to be unable to escape from this world if the angels don't lend us a helping hand.

Actually, the police had already grasped the clue about Toshi and Hakamizaka from the medication that they got from Ayaka's body, it's just because of the fact that Hakamizaka is the son of a politician, they've handled the evidence that they collected very carefully. They never would've thought that a large group of NEETs would barge in, and even turned the whole matter upside down. The CID who interrogated me seemed to know Tetsu-senpai as well, and he told me the whole truth dolefully.

I was let go after just being interrogated once, while quite a few people from Hirasaka-gumi, led by Yondaime, were arrested. The reason that Alice and I were immediately released was probably because Yondaime hid a part of the truth, because he said to me when we separated: "You owe me one."

Hakamizaka Shirou was dead even when the ambulance arrived at the scene; the other five who took part in manufacturing and selling the drugs also overdosed on the drug, and died in the hospital.

Just like that, the angels' wings disappeared from the streets.

A typical ending.

I'm not sure of the details of what occurred after that, because I didn't show up at Hanamaru Ramen Shop anymore.

*

January ended, and February passed gradually. After a few snowstorms, I failed in three more subjects in the end of semester test at the end of February.

I kept avoiding the Gardening Club, as I would think of Ayaka and get depressed there. Why was I depressed? I looked at the barren garden from the window of the classroom. It's just that I've returned to the days before I met Ayaka, the me at that time didn't feel painful when I was alone.

The reason that I changed was of course, because I started to understand the warmth of having other people by my side, so I thought of ways to forget about it, and avoid talking to the others. To my classmates who were worried about me and tried to chat with me, I just shook my head, refusing to say anything. Right after the make up examinations ended, I stopped going to school.

It's just that I've gone back to the days before I met her— those are just lies.

Ayaka's disappearance was like the wound of a scratch, deeply etched into my heart.

*

Sometimes, I would subconsciously remember things about Ayaka. Especially during midnight, when I laid on my bed, staring at the pitch black skies at the other side of the glass window.

Next, I would think of Alice's cold hands, Min-san's ice cream, and the sounds and laughter of four people surrounding a bowl, playing a game of dices.

But that did not exist solely for me. If I firmly deem that they exist solely for me, when I discover the truth, all of this would be taken away, defiled, vanish, leaving my own pitiful self.

If the ending is like this, it's better if I don't get closer from the start.

Those are my conclusions. Even if I would be alone like this, and nobody would ever speak to me or call my name again.

*

But one night, my phone suddenly rang. I kept skipping school, and just like that, the spring holidays arrived. On the first day of the spring holidays, my phone rang. It was because I was rolling around on my bed with the lights on, that I subconsciously picked up the phone.

'It's me, go to your school right away. I'm waiting for you in front of the entrance.'

It was Alice. It was indeed Alice's voice.

I couldn't believe it, and was dumbstruck, my phone pressed to my phone, and stared blankly at the ceiling.

'What's with you? Are you trying to tell me that you're going to sleep soon? Late night is the time that I move about. As my assistant, you're telling me that you want to sleep? Isn't it the spring holidays right now? Hurry up and make preparations to come out.'

"Wh….." Unable to speak properly, I choked. "Wh- Why? The school?"

Does Alice know what time it is?

'It is now three thirty five at night. Come here in thirty minutes. You are absolutely not allowed to let me wait for you outside.'

"Why do I……:"

'You just have to ask about everything, such an annoyance. You're my assistant, right? Or did you forget about our employment contract? I have something that I need you to see, so don't ask anymore, hurry up and come.'

I flipped over my phone and looked at it in great detail. I just have this feeling that the phone call was just my imagination, but the liquid plasma screen did show a phone log.

Something for me to see?

As I was determined not to meet again, I originally wanted to just

ignore Alice's phone call and sleep. But even when I closed my eyes and lied down on the bed to sleep, Alice's words still lingered in my mind.

School. Something that I have to see.

Would it be something about Ayaka?

I got up from the bed and carefully tip toed downstairs to avoid waking my sister, and walked out of the entrance. Probably because it's already springtime, I could finally go out at night without wearing a sweater.

I got onto my bike, riding in a zephyr in the night.

*

"You're late by twelve minutes."

Alice was mad. Just like that day, she wore a black, western dress, a bonnet with a veil on it, held a plushie of a baby bear in her hands, and was squatting down on the pillar in front of the school gate.

It was the first time I came to the entrance of M High School late at night, white fluorescent lights on the walls surrounding the school faintly illuminated the campus. A corner of the glass window on the third floor reflected the moon. There wasn't anyone in there.

"Because you have this look of incomprehension on your face, I'll just tell you first. I'm a hikikomori, the degree of my pain of staying outside is like extending an exponential function. You might think that twelve minutes is not a big deal, but for me, you'll have to add the twenty five minutes of getting here from my room."

"Sorry, but since it's already late at night, it's better not to make a fuss out here."

Alice's shut mouth started to pout, and caught hold of my belt with trembling hands.

"Take me to the place where the few potted plants are placed on

the rooftop.”

“Rooftop……? But……”

“I’m a NEET detective. The alarms have already been switched off, and I have the keys as well.”

How did she get the keys?

“If you want to know, just ask Major. I’m don’t know about the details. Goodness knows how he got that.”

Major…… I had this feeling from before that he had criminal tendencies, but never would I thought that it was true. But why are we going to the rooftop anyways?

Alice stopped answering my questions, showed me a ‘you’ll know when you see it’ expression and pushed on my back forcefully. I sighed and accepted the keys.

After I opened the door, I stepped onto the nostalgic uneven ground of cement. As it was unlit, it was pitch black at the rooftop. The streetlights were too low after all, while the brightness of the stars was too far away.

The indistinct view of the night could be seen at the other side of the railings. Through the river, gazing at the direction of the station, the brightness of that area was like a desecration of the night. With its back to the station, the ambiguous boundary between the night sky and the earth were scattered with headlamps and the lights that seeped out of the windows of the buildings.

My thanks to the night sky. If it was daytime right now, I would probably think of Ayaka again, right?

“Ahhhh, there’s something helpful here. Could we climb up there from here?”

Alice said while tightly holding onto my belt behind me. Raising my head to look upwards, there was only the night sky and a huge, black hole— no, the shadow of the water tower.

"…… are you climbing?"

"Being higher is better."

I had wanted to say that it's too dangerous climbing up in the dark, but was deterred by Alice's determined eyes. But even if I climbed up the ladder, I still had to use up a lot of energy to drag the helpless Alice up.

"What is with this ladder, not even thinking for users who are my size, really!"

Alice clambered up to the top of the water tower, sticking close to the surface that was uneven due to being slightly raised, and complained while panting.

"You could just put the plushie at the bottom….."

"Do you think I can stand the horrors of being outside without Lyril? I know that you're both cold and insensitive, but I didn't know that you're that over!"

"Okay, I get it, I get it, sorry."

Alice soared angrily while clutching on my clothes for dear life, not even being slightly courageous.

"So what are we going to do next? Summon a UFO?"

"We wait till dawn."

"…… Eh?"

"We're waiting here until dawn."

I couldn't say anything for a moment.

I had wanted to complain, but after seeing Alice hugging her knees, burying her chin in her teddy bear while with her eyes glued to the floor of cement, I couldn't say anything.

Alice said that she had something for me to see. She did this for me,

and only me, and for that reason she came out from her shell— the room that was full of machines, to wait for me, didn't she?

I squatted down beside Alice, feeling the warmth of her body beside me.

There was only the slight sounds of the wind, faraway exhaust pipes of cars, and the sound of Alice's breathing.

Not knowing for how long, as if pure, clear water seeped into the bottom of the night, the skies gradually turned blue. The lights of the streetlights started to fade, while the darkness of the night gradually faded from the floors of the rooftop. Bunches of weeds could be seen on the cement floor.

"Ayaka……"

Alice said in a small voice.

"Did she really go away without telling you a thing?"

I bit my lips and nodded.

"Really? Then I will tell you the words that have faded away in place of the deceased."

"…… Eh?"

"That would be the reason why Ayaka chose to jump down from the school building. It's going to be daybreak soon."

Alice said that it was the sole mystery.

The mystery that connected me to Alice.

"…… Do you understand now?"

"Ayaka jumped down from the rooftop so that the rooftop would be sealed off."

"……. Wh……What?"

"Don't you understand? This is the sacred place where you and

Ayaka spent your time together. So that no other people would trespass in here, she chose to jump off here. The graduation photos were to be taken here, right? But if someone committed suicide here, the school must seal off all the entrances to the rooftop because of safety reasons— you see, it has started."

Started? What started?

Following Alice's gaze, I looked at the floor of the rooftop.

In the long, extended period of time, the sun rose behind me. The clear morning that gently blended together light and darkness, cold air filled my surroundings, and I realized at that moment.

At the start, I thought that something was off, but the lush grassy land on the cement floor started to recover its greenery while bathing in the rays of sunlight, and a vivid red spread throughout the surrounding as if they were dyed.

Flowers.

In the dense grassy land on the rooftop, many flowers started to bloom, as though welcoming the morning sun.

I almost cried out loud, a hot substance filling my throat. The red stars that surfaced from the greenery clearly drew out a picture.

"The flowers are planted in a circle…… No, a double circle…… or triple……?"

Alice said in a small voice that wasn't much different from the sound of her breathing. My fingers tightly clenched my knees, and shook my head. No, that's not a circle. The letter G was inside of C, while the letter M was engulfed by the letter G.

It was our flag.

It's the symbol that connects Ayaka and I.

In the light of dawn, it was as though the flowers used their faces to greet joy, blooming splendidly. How long did Alice and I stare silently at the flowers?

“Long-headed poppy.”

Alice stared at our flag while muttering.

“They bloom as soon as day breaks, and withers after a day.”

I couldn’t shift my gaze, and could only nod in agreement. My chest hurts like it was being held tightly, and heat rose in my body. I’m the only one left, and there’s nobody beside me. Why? Why did you leave this thing? Why are you letting me remember this?

“Ayaka might have been blinded by the drug, but she remembered this place in the end, and jumped down to protect this place.”

Alice said with a small but determined voice.

“I know.” My voice that came from my throat was wet.

“Ayaka kept thinking for you.”

“I know!”

So what? I don’t need this thing, I only wish that Ayaka would continue to be healthy. My wish is so small, it’s just that small……

“Of course all of this is only my assumptions, but I don’t really know if it’s true. Digging out the words of the deceased from their graves—“

“Shut up!”

“—anyways, it is just a consolation for the living. What Ayaka was really thinking of, I don’t understand too. But……”

Alice stacked her hand on my hand that was on my knee.

“This beautiful scene is real, only this is a fact. So you must accept it, right?”

The flag of flowers in my eyes started to blur, and the rooftop melted in a sea on that morning. The first teardrop trickled down from my cheeks, and they couldn’t be stopped anymore, and filled

my whole world. That was the first time I cried after Ayaka's suicide.

Why do people only leave memories? Isn't it better if they rook away the memories about them with their death? Memories can't be erased, my whole life before me would be used up to search for Ayaka's true message in this beautiful scene.

"Narumi, do you hate me for bringing you here?"

Facing Alice's question, I shook my head, tears flowing down my face. How could I hate you?

"Then it's better if you just hate me. I've told you before, Ayaka's suicide, your sadness, all of them are my fault."

"Stop talking."

"I can only use this method to connect with the world, so it's better if you hate me or reprimand me."

"STOP TALKING!"

I shouted harshly, turning around to face Alice. Her large eyes seemed to have a hint of tears in it, but those might just be my own tears.

"Is there any meaning to that? Are you an idiot? Shout when you're angry like the others, and laugh when you're happy like the others, speak your mind when you want something, why can't you even do such a simple thing?"

"Because I'm that kind of person, didn't you know?"

"I don't know!"

I flung away Alice's hand that was tightly holding on to my shirt.

"Narumi, wait—."

I jumped down from the water tower, bouts of aches coming from my knees and my waist. I ignored Alice's words, rushed out of the

door and down the stairs. I, myself, don't understand why am I so angry, but the anger was neither directed at Ayaka nor Alice, and not myself either.

Tears choked my throat. I ran in the streets on this morning, my lungs hurting like they were burning. When I ran past the bridge, the morning sun illuminated my face from the side.

I stood still temporarily, placed my elbows on the railings and looked downwards. I wept for awhile, the tears dropped down, and were absorbed by the billowing dust that was swept up by a truck..

*

Even so, I'm still just a useless, brainless, insensitive and cold-blooded person. The meaningless anger vanished right that day, and tears couldn't even come out anymore.

Humans could get used to anything.

And they don't even feel that their habits are sorrowful things.

The people who feel that it's sorrowful are probably those who are in heaven, huh?

All of us are just manipulated by the notebook that was scribbled on randomly by that guy, being a bit angrier every day, smiling some more, then regret some more, we could only strive to live on like this.

*

On the evening two days after that, I dragged my sluggish body, wearing a thick woolen jacket, and wobbly rode my bike to the hospital.

Ayaka was still in a coma.

In the bright room that was so bright that it's annoying, the patient that is lying on the bed at the center of the room didn't even have a

hint of blood in her face, and that person is Ayaka. The nurses told me: “She’s still breathing!” but I can’t see any movement in her chest. The ward was so silent that I could almost hear the sound of the liquid in the IV drip trickling through the tube.

I thought, Ayaka’s body is indeed here.

But her soul is at goodness knows where.

At that time, light shone from the other side of the door that was forcefully opened because of the drug. The place that I saw was probably not where Ayaka was, but my own; while the destination that Hakamizaka headed to was the darkness in his heart. We are all imprisoned in our own body, and probably couldn’t go elsewhere.

That’s right, are you Fujishima-kun? I raised my head because of the nurse’s question. I think that they are Ayaka’s classmates, they’ve brought something and asked me to give them to you.

The nurse took something out of the wardrobe at the side of the walls. It was a plastic bag that was filled with ten colored papers. Words written with an oil-based pen was written on the plastic bag: ‘Fujishima-kun’s ten papers’.

I blankly stared at the face of the nurse. The nurse smiled and pointed in the direction of the bed. At that moment, I realized that about a thousand paper cranes were hung beside her pillow, and the card that was nearby said that it was a gift from class 1-4.

Just call me if there’s anything. The nurse left after saying that.

I’m alone.

I looked at the plastic bag with the colored papers inside with my head lowered.

Why didn’t they forget about me? I didn’t even answer them when they talked to me, I didn’t even go to school.

I would probably cry if I continued to think about it, so I sat down on the round stool and took out the colored papers from the bag.

It was just ten paper cranes, but it took me a long, long time. Each one of the paper cranes were all quite ugly due to them being crumpled up. To tie the cranes onto the thousand cranes, I went to the side of the pillow and suddenly found something.

On the wardrobe at the other side of the bed, things that seemed like gifts from the visitors were stacked on it, forming an intriguing combination.

A small wreath of flowers was placed in a transparent, palm-sized box.

Beside the wreath of flowers was a plastic tank model.

The only normal present was a flower basket with dried up flowers.

And there was also a 350cc deep red can.

At the side of the bed, which is also at the side of Ayaka's face, I bent down my back and looked directly at Ayaka.

Saying that I can't go anywhere is just a lie, because I can still walk with my own two feet. Ayaka can't even use her legs to walk around now, but I have somewhere that I must go.

After hanging the ten paper cranes with the thousand paper cranes, and was about to walk out of the ward, I suddenly stopped.

It was like I've heard something, like someone was calling me, so I turned my head around. Of course, it was just my illusion, as Ayaka was still frozen at the middle of the white ward. But I noticed the changes on Ayaka, hurriedly rushed to the bed and stared at her face.

Ayaka's eyelids slowly fluttered open.

I could see the color of Ayaka's irises, but she was not looking at me. Ayaka's eyes probably saw through my face, saw through the ceiling of the hospital, passed through the blue skies of the spring that was so sunny that it made people feel stupid, and was looking at that open door.

My hand moved on its own, not sure of how many time I pressed the emergency button. The sound of many footsteps came closer to the ward and surrounded me. The nurses pushed me away and pressed herself close to Ayaka's face. As soon as she said to call a doctor, another nurse hurriedly ran out of the ward. The people wearing white robes finally surrounded the bed and started to argue after doing a brain wave examination, saying that it was the reflective action of the iris, then shooed me out of the ward.

The white haired doctor walked out and started to explain about Ayaka's condition to me, who was sitting blankly in the sofa of the corridor. Everything isn't clear yet, as they won't know if they didn't do detailed examination. Although it's not too clear, conditions like this would occur occasionally. Although the chances of her awakening are small, there is still a possibility.

So go home for today.

I once chose to cover my ears and just wait.

But now I have a place that I must go. So, I nodded and stood up.

*

Passing the bridge, passing through the Shuto Expressway, going around the station, I walked towards Hanamaru Ramen Shop that I didn't show up for about a month and a half already.

"I've thought of a new dish: 'Sesame Butter Ramen', try it!"

Min-san, who was about to start work, said as if nothing had happened. It was like I came here yesterday and the day before yesterday. Min-san's tone of speech made my chest hurt— but they also calmed me.

"Sesame and butter are both good, but when mixed……"

I think that they'll be bad.

"Stop your blabbering. It's going to be done soon, so eat it."

“I have to go to Alice’s place for awhile.”

“Hmm— ? Ahhhh, that’s right……”

Min-san stretched her upper body out of the counter and patted my shoulder.

“She’s really mad, you should be mentally prepared.”

Eh, she’s really mad

“There’s no ice cream to help you this time, so you’ll have to put in effort yourself!”

Min-san laughed evilly, and forcefully pushed at my back. It can’t be helped, it’s my fault, after all.

*

The air in the NEET Detective Agency was so cold that it could freeze people to death, and my feelings were also as sharp as the shards of ice that were given out by the air conditioner along with the cold air. Alice, who was wearing pajamas, had her back to me. Her black hair that flowed on the blanket like rivers looked like a sharp object made of glass that day.

“No need, you don’t need to apologize to me, it’s just a small thing. Forsaking me on top of the water tower at the rooftop that day, although I experienced two hours like I was an abandoned man-made satellite, I couldn’t find any reason for you to apologize even after looking through the whole world. Being unable to climb down the ladder myself is completely my own fault. If you really want to apologize, then go look for Major. He was called out by my phone call early that morning, hid from the teachers on duty that day and fetched me from the water tower."

“…… I’m sorry, it’s all my fault. I apologize to you.”

Alice didn’t even turn her head over, harshly pounding on the keyboard. Empty cans of Dr. Pepper were stacked beneath the bed, forming a circular wall.

She's obviously mad. Why am I so stupid?

It's just because Alice was talking to me at my side, I vented my confused emotions on her, just like a kid.

"Didn't I say you don't need to apologize to me!"

Alice's voice that sounded like there were thorns in it came from my back.

"But abandoning you outside and running home is indeed my fault. Sorry, I won't do it again. When we go out next time, I'll take really good care……"

The black hair suddenly moved. Alice turned her hair around, her face burning red.

"Th- th- that's just because you're coincidentally by my side! Don't talk as if I can't go out if you're not here!"

"Ah, so- sorry."

I curled up my body. I obviously didn't mean that too.

"What is the motive of you coming here today, besides making fun of me? If there's anything else, hurry up and speak!"

Alice swung her pillow around with her face red, hitting the carpet.

Something else.

The conversation just now was what I wanted to say…… If I just said that honestly, I would probably just make Alice even angrier, huh? What on Earth should I say?

Alice suddenly turned around to face the keyboard with her back against me.

I pondered for a moment on what to say.

Would this type of lame argument work?

I don't know, so I could only try.

"…… My employment contract…… is it still effective?"

The sound of the keyboard pounding stopped, the black hair flowing to a different direction because Alice turned around to face me. Her brows were tightly knotted, and the corner of her lips moved slightly downwards.

"Of course it's finished, because the contract ends when I find out about the truth."

"But……"

I used my tongue to wet my lips, suppressing the nervous emotions in my heart.

" Alice said it before, but you're still not sure about the situation. So……"

I crudely pointed out the errors in Alice's words. If it's Alice, if it's the usual Alice, she would've used fifteen times of her debating power to overwhelm me from the start. But the Alice at that moment suddenly froze because of my answer.

"So I'm still Alice's assistant, right?"

"So I'm here to apologize today, and from now on—"

Ayaka might awaken some day, and she might tell us the truth that day. So until that day, I will be Alice's assistant.

My words were interrupted because Alice suddenly started to throw empty cans of Dr. Pepper at me. The pure 'dong' sound of the metal rang.

"Idiot! Get out!"

Alice said with a slight red tinge on her cheeks. This was the shortest comment that I've ever heard Alice say.

I lowered my head, paused my breathing, sighed and stood up.

When I walked out of the room, actually I wasn't here for an

apology, and neither here for the matter about being her assistant, and so I've forgotten about it subconsciously because I thought that it was too stupid. Surely enough,the only words that I could say is just these.

"…… Thank you, in ways more than one."

I said to the silhouette wearing teddy bear pajamas.

Walking out of the room and closing the door, the sentence on the signboard came into my eyes.

It's the only NEET thing to do.

Shouldn't there be a better way of setting thing? But it can't be helped, I'm just a useless, brainless, insensitive and cold-blooded kid. For me, this is already the best effort that I have. If this doesn't succeed as well, the regret wouldn't get me anywhere.

There's no reason for me to be here now.

This is the result that I have chosen, because life cannot be turned back.

*

After I walked down the stairs and was walking towards the streets, I met a darkish person. It was Tetsu-senpai! I became harried. After just half a month, I didn't even know what to say at the start, I even thought of going past Tetsu-senpai and just runaway.

But Tetsu-senpai spoke as if nothing had happened:

"Oh? Well if it isn't Narumi. You came at just the right time."

From behind Tetsu-senpai, Hiro, Major who had a model gun slung on his back, and Yondaime who was wearing a purple vest were noisily walking towards the kitchen backdoor.

"Narumi, it's been a long time. We're going to visit Toshi today! To the police hospital, the police hospital! It's at Iidabashi, have you

ever went there before? No, right? It's my first time too." Hiro showed us a hearty smile as usual. "I never thought that Yondaime would come too, I really thought that he'd be locked up for five years or so too. I never would've thought that he'd be out so soon, so we're celebrating for him getting out of the jail."

"Don't say it like that, it's the end of my custody."

"So nobody in your gang got caught? Congratulations. Because it's your treat, I'll go all out and order a large bowl of roast pork noodles."

"Oi, wait a sec, why am I treating? Normally shouldn't it be the other way around?"

"It's the same when you get the ball into the hole when playing golf!"

"It's not!"

"You're so fussy, then how about the five of us play a game of poker, the last player treats!"

Tetsu-senpai took a pack of poker cards out of his pocket.

Five of us?

"Narumi, what are you doing? Hurry up and sit down!" Tetsu-sempai sat down on the stairs and knocked on the place beside him. Hiro who was sitting on the gas tank, Major who was sitting on the stacked up tires, and Yondaime who was sitting on the beer crate were all looking at me.

"…… I…… can join too?"

"Of course!" Hiro patted my back.

I stood blankly there, lowered my head and closed my eyes, trying to suppress my tears from falling. Why? Why would I feel like crying because of this? From that day, it feels like somewhere in my heart was hurt. But it's okay even so, it's not like my heart is broken

or something—

At that moment, the phone in my pocket started to vibrate.

I used my rigid hand to take out the phone from my pocket.

‘There’s two orders for you right now.’

Alice said. It was indeed Alice’s voice.

‘The first thing, change your ringtone to ‘Colorado Bulldog’.’

My hand that was holding the phone was trembling. So that my tears would not fall, I forced myself to look at the sunny skies.

‘The second thing, my stock of Dr. Pepper had finished. You’d see Lowson Market after you turn right at the end of the road, hurry up and go buy a crate of Dr. Pepper here.’

“Mnn, ah, that is……”

I said with tears in my eyes.

‘I’m not forgiving you, because I wasn’t even angry with you, and you don’t have to apologize to me!’

“Mnn, I understand.”

‘Write NEET Detective Agency at the end of the receipt.’

And then Alice hung up suddenly. I wiped my red eyes, and the four looked at me while smiling or in surprise.

“…… I want a sports drink.”

“I want black coffee from Wonder.”

“It’s fine as long as it’s hundred percent fruit juice.”

“Oolong tea. I’ll kill you if you dare to buy a brand other than Suntory.”

And so I immediately became the errand boy. Well, it’s okay even if

it’s like that. I might be a useless, brainless, insensitive and cold-blooded kid, but there’s still something that I could do.

Tetsu-senpai kicked my bottom, and I was kicked out. My pockets stuffed full of change, I ran towards the main street.

Afterword

Before this, my friend once told me some good advice that felt somewhat unpleasant to me. ‘Not only do your novels lack content, even the afterwords are lame. Your topics every time are empty and full of useless content that have absolutely no connection with your novel, do you actually think anyone wants to read this? Stop dreaming. A rich woman won't appear and pity you just because you show how poor you are in the afterword, or buy clothes for you and give you financial assistance.” Although I didn’t know why he knew my small dream in such detail, his words always made sense, causing me to be unable to retort. And it was because I loved to show off useless information: for instance, cup noodles that are soaked for twenty minutes would expand, filling the stomach easily; and they would make people lose their appetite because of its nasty taste, so a meal a day would be sufficient— and that caused the others to suspect that there’s a problem with my personality. So it’s about time to change the subject.

Then what should I write? My friend told me, the people who flip through books at a bookshop, most of them read the afterword. So I should introduce the contents of the novel in the afterword, and let people understand the contents at a glance. I agree. So that’s why many books have things about the contents in the afterword.

So here are the contents of the book:

“We are a group of dropouts known as people who only graduate from middle school, who don’t want to study, have no intention to work, and are labeled NEETs by the government. We left the wings of our parents, and stayed at the ramen shop; but are not cooped up at the ramen shop doing nothing! As long as we are free, and depending on how good the payment is, we, the NEET N Squad, can do anything. Changing the possible to the impossible, crushing the calculations of the Labour Bureau! We are the jobless NEET N Squad!

‘I’m Shionji Yuko, a NEET leader. Everyone calls me Alice. My

special skill is drinking a can of Dr. Pepper in one gulp and hacking into computer systems. If not for a genius commander like me, I wouldn't have the ability to be the leader of these useless NEETs.'

'I'm Kuwabara Hiroaki, everyone calls me Hiro. With my handsome appearance, women can't escape me. Because I'm living a life of a gigolo, from bras to panties(as long as they're lingerie), I collect them all.'

'Hi, sorry for the wait! I'm Mukai Hitoshi, everyone calls me Major. My wiretapping and photo taking skills are top notch! You're saying that I'm a Jojo's Bizarre Adventure otaku? A military otaku? So? So what?'

'I'm Ichinomiya Tetsuo, everyone calls me Tetsu the Pachinko Master. I can beat up the police who are out patrolling, but don't play dices with me!'

We are the NEET N Squad who don't have any value for survival, bravely challenging the society that says we won't eat if we don't work! If you dropped out too, remember to look for us!"

…… And that's how it is. Furthermore, although he's not in the summary, the main character is actually a male high school student.

Because some professional nomenclature often appears in my work, I'll explain to the readers here—

'NEET' : The word is formed from the initials of the sentence 'Not in Education, Employment or Training.'. The one that is most misunderstood is the first one, 'unemployed'. This is not related to one's salary. Just like me, who is always showing off his poor financial status in the afterwords, dreaming of the day when a rich woman will feed me — although I have a salary, I'm still a NEET.

'Dr. Pepper': A beverage that was released in America in 1885 and is now common everywhere, is the oldest carbonated drink of them all. In Japan, because there's only five companies that import Dr. Pepper, including the Coca Cola Company, the vending machines that sell Dr. Pepper can only be found in the Kanto, Niigata, Shizuoka and Okinawa districts.

‘Playing dices’: A game that was played in Japan since old times, the requirements are three dices. A large profit can be obtained if played as a gambling game, so it is against the hundred and eighty fifth law of Japan’s gambling law. I nearly went against the law too.

‘You won't eat if you don't work’: According to the twenty seventh law of Japanese law, each and every person has the right and obligation to work. I’ve asked my friend in the law profession: I don’t need rights, so can I not have the obligation? After laughing heartily for twenty minutes, he told me: 'If you want to return the rights, then you must first relieve yourself of the obligation to live.'

Since the publisher said that I could write four pages for the afterword, I feel that I can put in some simple and useful information in it. Although people probably will write useless things if they have spare pages, there’s still one page, so I would like to say something meaningful.

About the starting point of the book: the idea of a ‘NEET detective’, I thought of it when I was chatting on a BBS late at night. The initial setting for the detective was a twenty eight year old jobless NEET man, even though he’s a detective, he’s reliant on the Internet and stays at home every day. If someone gave him a request, he would use Google to search, or post questions on major BBSes to search for an answer, a useless character.

Although I say this every time, this book could only be published with the help of many people. A special thanks to Y-san who proposed that I change the detective to a girl, the responsible editor, Yuasa(?)-sama who edited my drafts repeatedly, Kishida Mel-sensei who gave life to the characters, here I give them my greatest thanks. Thank you.

November 2006, Sugii Hikaru

Notes

1. ↑ Japanese idiom, idiots and smoke like high places.
2. ↑ A cloth used to bind one's chest
3. ↑ In Japanese, jobless and colorless have the same pronunciation (Mushoku)
4. ↑ Song by the band Mr. Big
5. ↑ Originally, it’s a game where each player tells the name of a station that the Yamanote Line can reach. Here, they will say things that are related to the topic given
6. ↑ 有子is read as Yuuko, but 有can be read as ari, 子 can be read as su